Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

JANUARY 1952
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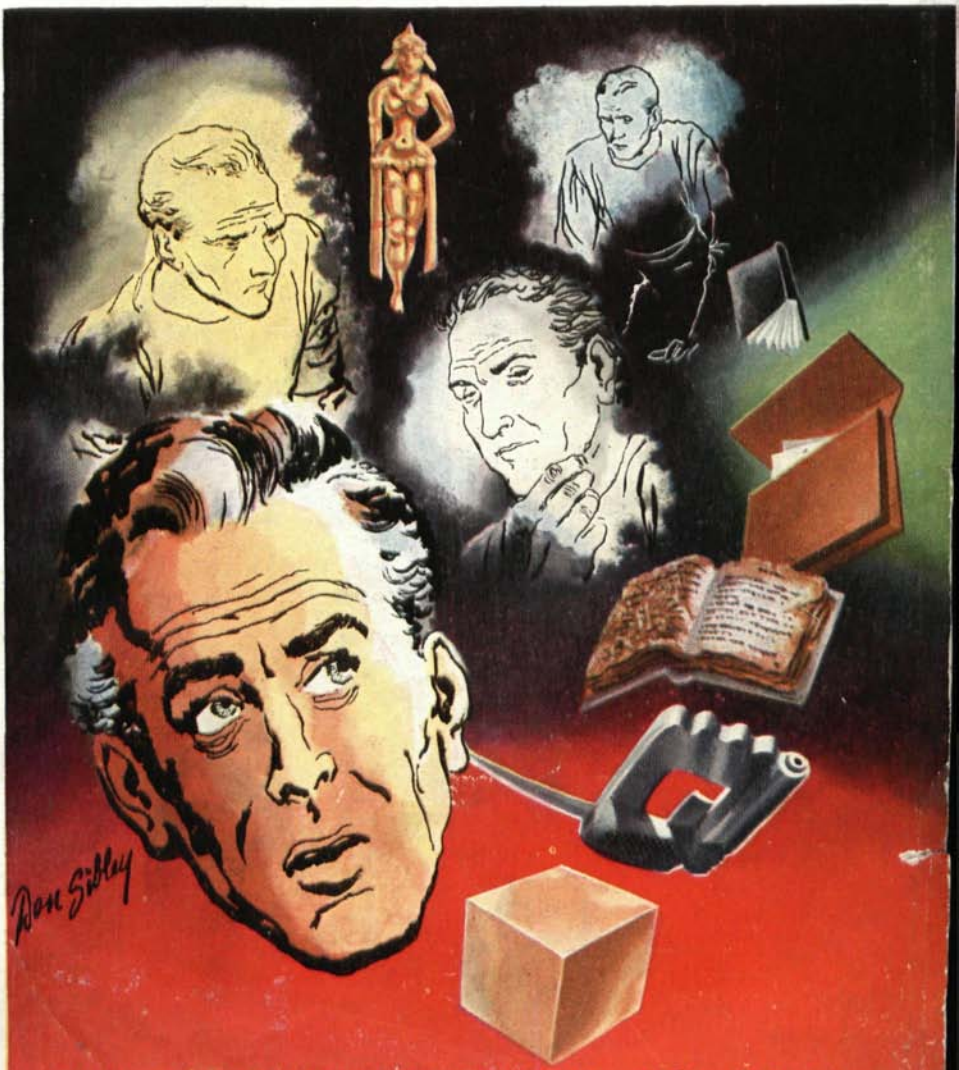

THE DEMOLISHED MAN by Alfred Bester

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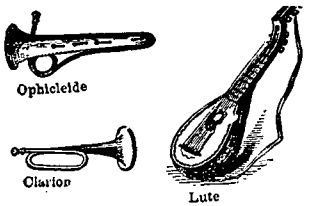

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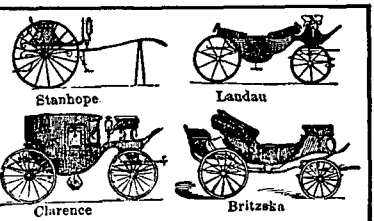

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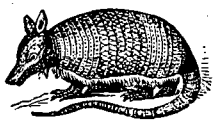

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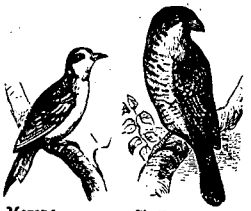

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Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

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JANUARY, 1952 Vol. 3, No. 4

CONTENTS

BOOK-LENGTH SERIAL—Installment 1

THE DEMOLISHED MAN ..... *by Alfred Bester* 4

NOVELETS

THE GIRLS FROM EARTH ..... *by Frank M. Robinson* 80

HALLUCINATION ORBIT ..... *by J. T. M'Intosh* 132

SHORT STORIES

DEAD END ..... *by Wallace Macfarlane* 67

THE FURIOUS ROSE ..... *by Dean Evans* 103

THE ADDICTS ..... *by William Morrison* 122

FEATURES

EDITOR'S PAGE ..... *by H. L. Gold* 2

FORECAST 114

GALAXY'S FIVE STAR SHELF ..... *by Groff Conklin* 115

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Gloom & Doom

IT'S a depressing experience to sit at a desk and read story after story filled with pessimism and despair. The temptation is strong to write: "Look, fellers, the end isn't here yet. It probably won't come, any more than the frantic prophecies of history occurred, including Wells's dismal forecasts of the world wars. Why not buck up and see the positive trends as well as the harrowing ones?"

The fact is that I've written that letter, or something similar, to any number of writers.

Net result:

Over 90% of stories submitted still nag away at atomic, hydrogen and bacteriological war, the post-atomic world, reversion to barbarism, mutant children killed because they have only ten toes and fingers instead of twelve, world dictatorships, problems of survival wearily turned over to women, war, more war, and still more war—between groups, nations, worlds, solar systems.

If it weren't so tiresome, it might be funny to see our transitory political rivalries carried into the remotest futures. I've been having the experience, while reading books to select for the GALAXY Novels series, to find old stories seriously debating the troubles that we of the middle 20th Century were to have had with an arrogant Kaiser, fanatical Chinese Boxers, even a Napoleon. These books are dated enough in scientific and sociological ways, but the extension of long-resolved political questions into the future makes them almost laughable.

Does that minimize the threats that existed then, or our present world situation? Certainly not. Neither is it escapism to project a future in which democracy vs. communism is no longer an issue. There is no way of knowing how long it will take that difficulty to be resolved, nor even—personal hopes aside—how or in whose favor. But there can be no doubt that it will become a part of history, along with slavery vs. feudalism, and feudalism vs. democracy, bloomers and one-piece bathing suits for women.

Science fiction has a more important job than to warn of doom. Its function is not to spread joy and optimism, either. The first is the province of news "analysts" and politicos, scientists with guilty consciences and the opponents of progress in any form. The second — brainlessly eager optimism — is dispensed adequately by light fiction and

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popular articles informing us that disasters can be fun.

As I've said before, science fiction should present *possible* developments based on present tendencies or trends, to answer *in dramatic terms* the unstated question: "What would happen if—?"

Good Lord, the world today is loaded with ifs! So crammed, crowded, bulging with ifs jostling each other, in fact, that it's a pure bafflement to see writers turning the same ones over and over, looking for some new bump never before noticed on the use-worn surfaces.

If this applied only to new authors, it would warrant patient encouragement and no worry—just let them get past the obvious ideas and they'd be all right. But the most consistent practitioners of the trite are many established writers who should be making their greatest contribution now, with science fiction becoming so important a phenomenon that even the Russians had to pause between walkouts to term it a sign of capitalist degeneration!

Actually, the growth of the field has paradoxically interfered with its growth. The movies, TV, slick magazines and book publishers have been concentrating on the sensational, or cataclysmic, aspects. Enough new magazines have been started to provide a market for almost any story, no matter how unreadable, by any writer with a known name. Why should they knock themselves out to meet the high standards of GALAXY? They do not make as much per word, but the volume of sales supposedly compensates.

There is an answer to that, but it's not visible to anyone too busy exploring the explored to see the less apparent.

One after another, the new magazines—and many of the old—are dying of literary cirrhosis. The cause? Poisoning due to decayed fiction.

There is a double solution to this quandary: established writers in many cases will have to revise their standards — and stories — and new authors must be induced to enter the field.

GALAXY is trying fervently to accomplish both objectives. Known authors who depend only on their names to sell inferior fiction are finding no market in GALAXY; new authors who are willing to dig for ideas and fresh treatments are getting an enthusiastic, cooperative welcome.

Cato noticed 2,000 years ago that the world was going to the dogs. If he were alive now, he'd accept the present as a good substitute for Paradise — atomic threat or no atomic threat!

—H. L. GOLD

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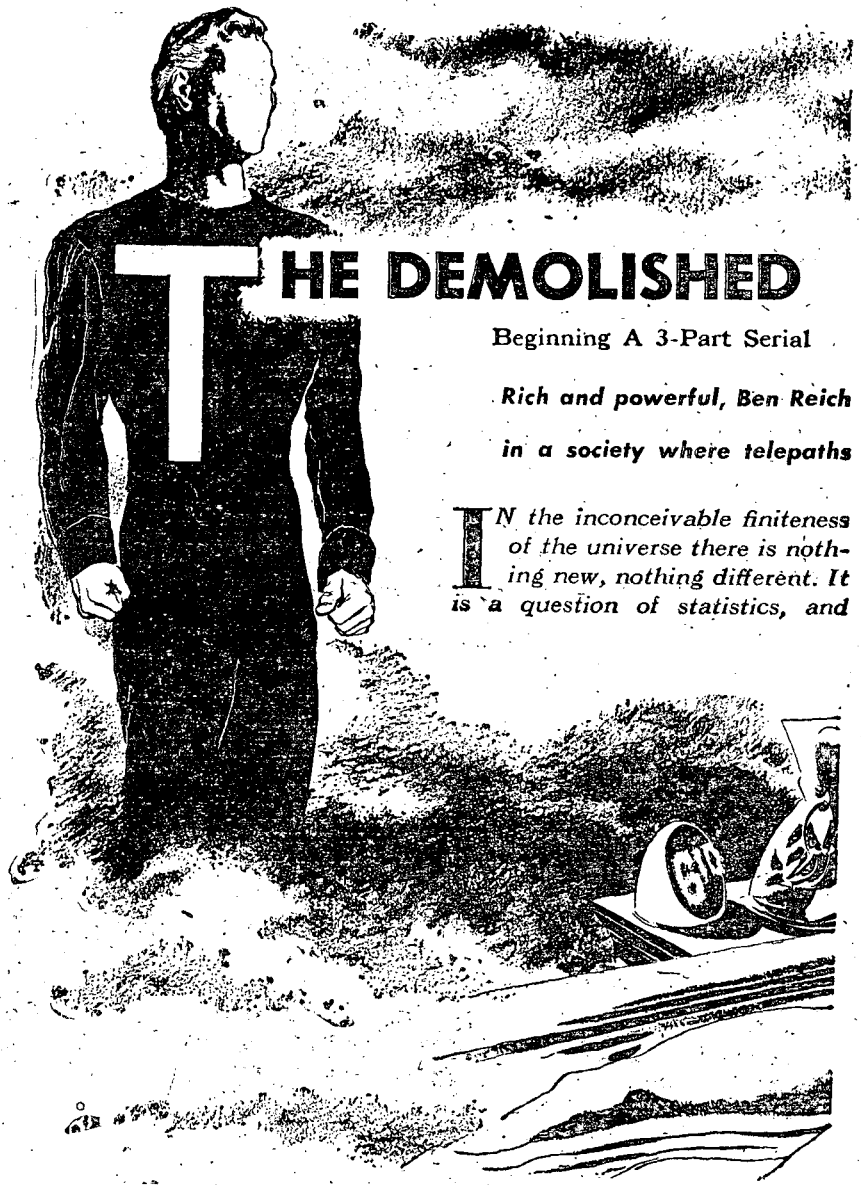

THE DEMOLISHED

Beginning A 3-Part Serial

Rich and powerful, Ben Reich

in a society where telepaths

IN the inconceivable finiteness of the universe there is nothing new, nothing different. It is a question of statistics, and

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MAN

By ALFRED BESTER

was a criminal who couldn't possibly fail,

made it unlikely for criminals to succeed!

what may appear exceptional to the minute mind of man may be inevitable to the infinite Cosmic Eye. What appears to be unique may be commonplace. This strange second in a life . . . that unusual event . . . those remarkable coincidences of environment,

Illustrated by DON SIBLEY

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opportunity, encounter or re-encounter . . . all of them may be reproduced precisely and exactly over and over again on the planet of a sun in the Galaxy that revolves once in two hundred million years and has revolved nine times already.

There are and have been worlds and cultures without end, each perhaps (unaware of the sobering mortification of statistics) nursing the proud illusion that it is unique, irreplaceable, irreproduceable. There have been men without end, suffering from the same megalomania, who have made nations and worlds suffer too. There will be more, more plus infinity. This is the story of such a man . . . The Demolished Man.

ON Sol Double-3-(for the Cosmic Eye sees Earth and her moon as a planetary binary) in January of 2103, Edward Turnbul of Coates Teachers College decided to explore the Hysterisis Enigma for his research thesis. The Reamur Variations on the Einstein Post-mortem Equations had suggested a paradox which no one had bothered to explore. Atomic research had bypassed it; and what are the dead ends of science for if not to provide harmless occupation for graduate students? Turnbul studied the original research, ran a few duplications and then tinkered with the apparatus.

Get the picture: A serious young man, fat, sallow, a genuine bore. A Phi Beta Kappa anesthetising his frustrations in a laboratory. A magnet is his sweetheart; caulds of X-27 Duplexor are his conjugal embraces. He tinkers at midnight and sublimates his maladjustments in the excitement and suspense of the experiment. Will it work? Can he really develop a commercial process, earn a million dollars and overpower women with this uncontestable proof of his virility?

Turnbul unwraps a sandwich, aping the dashing insouciance of fictional heroes, then pulls the switch. The experiment works. Thirty-two pounds of apparatus and a liter of methylene dimethyl ether loft up from the bench and smash against the ceiling. Turnbul has stumbled on something they just missed a century ago . . . anti-gravity. Unique? No. Inevitable. In the infinity of a universe crawling with searching, inquiring, experimenting creatures, this had happened, was happening and would happen beyond the count of simple integers. Statistics made it inevitable.

Forget Turnbul. He is not your protagonist. If you identify with him, you will be lost in this story, as Turnbul himself is lost in the

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shifting pattern that produced the Demolished Man. Turnbul patented; he was sued. He fought in courts for fifteen years with inadequate counsel and the patent was broken. Turnbul was notorious enough by that time to receive a full professorship at the Institute. He married a librarian, raised children, taught miserably, and jealously inspected each new textbook, content if credit for Nulgee was paid him in footnote or appendix.

IN September of 2110, Galen Gart's wife died. She was a tall, lustrous, remote woman, and he had loved her deeply for thirty years. They had been a devoted couple, and in the course of their marriage had grown to resemble each other, as couples often do. It was hard to distinguish their handwriting, their voices, their jokes.

"We even think alike," Gart used to say. "Half the time I answer her before I realize she hasn't had a chance to speak her thoughts." And after her death he said: "What's the use of going on? We were part of each other. We didn't need words. How can anyone else give me the same intimacy?"

But Galen Gart, fifty, desolate, prematurely aging, met a pungent child of twenty with an exciting poitrine, a satin skin, and the infantile nickname of Duffy, and they were married six months after the funeral.

"You're not so old in the dark."

"Why, Duffy!" exclaimed Mr. Gart. "What a nice thing to say."

"But I didn't say anything." Nor had she.

It was a year before Mr. Gart realized that it was he who didn't need words. It became his joke, his little parlor trick, a quaint trait.

"So this is the famous Galen Gart. Mind reader? Imposs. Tricks. Can't fool me. Can't read my mind."

"But I can, dear lady. I can."

"You ca— But I didn't say it. I—"

"Hey! Everybody! Gart's done it again."

"Look at her blush."

"What's she thinking, Gart?"

"Why's she blushing?"

"The lady," Mr. Gart smiled, "is thinking that I'm laughing at her. She's blushing because I'm telling her I admire her. She has one of the loveliest minds I have ever met."

Laughter.

Oh yes; laughter at the quaint trait when gentle, tactful, courteous Mr. Gart performed his parlor trick. But the trait was an extracted recessive that appeared in his son.

There was no more laughter when the amoral animal that a

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child is discovered it had inherited Extra Sensory Perception and used it brutally. Galon Gart, Jr., turned laughter to tears, and many texts were written about his lurid criminal career that ended with his murder. And Galen Gart, Jr., Esper blackmailer, confidence trickster and thief, helped produce The Demolished Man.

THE vacant lot across the way from Sheridan Place was finally sold, and Space Clubs, Inc., was forced to move its Raffle Office and prizes to Brooklyn. Their funds barometer, a miniature explosive rocket hanging halfway up an illuminated column calibrated in thousands of dollars, was abandoned. The lot was turned into a block of experimental al fresco stores, without walls or roof, protected from the elements and casual theft by the new Donaldson Resistance Hedge, an invisible bubble of radiation that scintillated in wet weather with the prismatic glitter of oil on water.

The center shop, alongside the entrance to the Pneumatique Station, was taken in 99 year lease by Wilson Winter, an ambivalent artist turned bookseller, who purchased one lot of odds and ends for the benefit of literature, and conducted a thriving trade in pornography for the benefit of his purse. Among the worthless items in the odds & ends was *Let's Play Party* by Nita Noyes. It collected dust on the shelf until it was bought by The Demolished Man.

REALISM IS 4TH DIMENSION

PLATON QUINN, brilliant young producer of Pantys, attributes his phenomenal success to close attention to detail. In an exclusive interview with yr recorder he said: "People forget that 'Panty' is slang for Emotional Pantograph. When you get five thousand people into a theatre to see a Panty performance, you can't make them feel love, hate, horror . . . You can't Gestalt *them unless you put authentic detail on the Passion tape."*

Quinn, lithe and enthusiastic, waved his hands creatively. "Too many producers think that Pantys are a three-dimensional medium . . . sight, sound & sensation. To me, Pantys are four dimensional and my fourth dimension is realism. Every prop, every costume, every bit of cloth, metal, china, plastic and so on in my productions is authentic. And the public feels it. Here, look at this . . ."

The brilliant young producer showed us a glittering bit of steel. "You won't recognize it," he smiled, "until you've seen Murder's Memory Bank. This is the

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only one of its kind in existence. A rare French folding pistol. Watch."

He pressed the gadget. There was a vicious click. The steel unfolded like a flower. A stiletto point appeared, an explosive muzzle, and four heavy steel rings which, Quinn explained, were knuckledusters.

"A fistful of murder," Platon said enthusiastically. "Wait until you're in your seat at the preview. You feel the knife. You feel the bullet tear into your heart. You feel all the pain and horror of peril and passion. It's sensational. It's all in my new Panty, Murder's Memory Bank."

Platon Quinn refolded the pistol, replaced it in the desk and forgot it. He forgot it when he left the hotel. It remained forgotten until it was used by The Demolished Man.

* * *

ANTI-Gravity or Nulgee was explored, developed and exploited. It smashed one industrial world and created five others. Among a million entrepreneurs scrabbling Phoenixlike in the ruins, it was adopted by "The 7 Sacrament Brothers," a single-truck moving firm owned and operated by a lone brother named Reich. Reich was a thin young man, equipped with a fishy eye, cannibal ambitions and a minimum of social responsibility.

Nulgee was also adopted by Space Clubs, Inc., who were having difficulty raising funds. Industry shrugged, preferring to leave the wild pioneering to fools. Who wants to speculate on probabilities? What commercial advantage can there be in reaching the arid Moon or the icy methanated planets? Who sponsored Cayley, Henson, Stringfellow, Chanute, Santos-Dumont, the Wrights? Also, there were several wars pending, and the armies were fighting to stifle Nulgee for insecure reasons of security.

Meanwhile, there was Alan Courtney. After divorcing his twelfth wife, Courtney started looking around for a new kind of hyper-thyroid release. He had enough money to bore him, and that was enough to start building a starship. His statement to the press announced that he was off to search the stars for an ideal wife. The press was indifferent to Mr. Courtney and he was piqued. Out of spite he finished the ship, and out of drunkenness he took off.

He never returned. No one believed he'd left. Five years later, most people were asking: "What ever happened to marrying Alan Courtney?" And people were answering: "He's living in Santa Fe, isn't he? Married again, probably."

There was also Glen Tuttle, a

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renegade psychotic who fleeced his wife and in-laws, bilked his creditors, defrauded his friends, and, in a final attempt to jump out of the frying pan, constructed a flimsy starship on credit and lofted to space unknown. Tuttle also never returned. His escape was never believed. Space Clubs was still talking about funds for the first ship to carry men to the Moon.

There were, in addition, Almedo Zigerra, Joan Turnbul, Fritz Wonchalk. Speeman Van Tuerk and a few others . . . maladjusted, incapable of social compromise, escapists all . . . which is to say, pioneers all. They left Earth one by one with varying publicity, little recognition, and never returned. Space Clubs Inc. cheered the donation of $100,000 by a transportation magnate named Reich, and predicted that man would soon leave Earth for his first journey into space. It had already taken place. It had already produced The Demolished Man.

SHE came through the door into the quiet consultation room and looked around. She was a drab woman, forty, faded, frightened. She saw the man behind the desk, a young man with black hair, black eyes, and Duffy's white satin skin.

"Come in, madam. Be seated." His voice was low, slightly harsh, as though it contained conflicts under compression.

"Thank you." She lowered herself painfully. *"Looks too slick. Thief-type. Hannerly said the guy might be legitimate. Not a chance. My recorder on? Right."*

"Your name, madam?"

"My name? *Rhoda Rennsaeler, buster, when you read it in the byline.* I'm Mrs. Thomas Nolles. Elvira is my given name."

"And your problem, Mrs. Nolles?"

"Well, I keep hearing those voices in my ear all the time talking to me. So I thought a doctor could—"

"I'm not a doctor, madam. Understand that. I do not practice medicine. I merely advise my friends. You may call call me mister. Mr. Lorry Gart."

"Cautious, aren't you? But I'll get you, buster, don't ever imagine I won't."

"Your problem, Mrs. Nolles?" Gart repeated.

"It's these voices. I hear them telling me I'm God. *And if you can resist that come-on, you're a smarter crook than I think.* I can pay for the treatment. *I've got a roll of bills you'll drool for, you cheap quack."*

"Provided by Mr. Hannerly?"

"Oh, no. It's my savings. I—" She stopped short.

Gart nodded and smiled. "Be-

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ginning to understand, Mrs. Rennsaeler?"

"I never said it. Never!"

"No, of course you didn't. Nor your name. You do understand, don't you? Now let's be practical, Mrs. Rennsaeler. I'm not a quack. You won't expose me. You'll forget all about this episode."

"But what in God's name are you?"

"A mind-reader . . . telepath . . . esper. I have Extra Sensory Perception, Mrs. Rennsaeler — ESP. I still haven't decided what to call myself." He looked at her quizzically. "I'd welcome a suggestion from an experienced reporter."

"The louse! Reading everything in my mind. Stop thinking! Why can't I stop thinking? He's listening. Like a Peeping Tom. Peeping. He—"

"Mrs. Rennsaeler, stop that!" Gart spoke sharply. He arose from his chair and stepped around the desk to her. "Listen to me. Don't be afraid. You feel the privacy of your shame is being invaded. That makes you hostile. But you have nothing to be ashamed of, Mrs. Rennsaeler. We're all alike inside our minds. *All* of us. I know. I've found that out."

She stared up at him in terror.

"Believe me." He nodded and grinned painfully. "Shall I tell you my shames, my secret fears and vices, my terrors? Shall we be brothers below the conscious threshold? My father was a criminal . . . Galen Gart Jr., a telepathic blackmailer, a cheat, a man who read minds to destroy people. He was murdered. I have in me the same extra sense, the ability to read minds . . . not deeply, but deeply enough. It's an ability tempted by greed, vicious hatred of society, compulsions to shock and destroy people . . . compulsions to destroy myself."

"I don't understand." She shook her head. "I don't understand at all."

"I'm stripping myself psychologically naked for you, Mrs. Rennsaeler. It's my defense against your hostility. I'm hoping that you can help me become something more than a backstreet conjurer. You're experienced in public relations."

"No," she said. "No. I came here to expose a quack. I—"

"Listen to me. I use my ability to help confused people. They come to me . . . the poor sick ones . . . so sick they can't discover their problems. I do only one thing for them. I help them recognize their problems. While they talk, I listen to their broken thoughts. While they wander and flounder in confusion, I pick out the pieces, the artifacts . . . I tell them what their crisis is. I

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make them see it. I wrap up their problem in a neat parcel and place it in their hands. They can carry it to the nearest analyst for solution, though that's generally not necessary."

"Then you're no quack."

"No, Mrs. Rennsaeler, I'm not. And you believe me. That much I can read in your mind. You believe me and you want to help me. Isn't that true?"

After a long pause she said: "Yes, you damned peeper. I believe you and I want to help you."

Gart took her hand. "You've started helping me already. You've given me my name."

* * *

The *Geoffrey Reich,* first manned ship to reach the Moon, discovered Glen Tuttle's ship and body in the center of a seventy-mile bed of Haines' Stellite valued at $6.83 a pound. The airlock of Tuttle's ship was open and the body sprawled at the entrance. Poor Tuttle was so ignorant that he never knew the Moon was airless. He had had time for one quick glance at Mare Imbrium before he suffocated. His body was riddled with machine-gun perforations from the meteoric pellets that bombard the unprotected Moon at 30 miles per second.

* * *

MR. ASJ: Counsel may cross-examine the witness.

MR. LECKY: If it please the court, at this time I would like to introduce Dr. Walter Clark E.M.D., as Esper Medical Expert to conduct the cross-examination of this hostile witness.

MR. ASJ: Objection.

THE COURT: What is your argument, Mr. Lecky?

MR. LECKY: I submit, your honor, that in this Matter of the Estate of Alan Courtney, a sum exceeding twenty-five million dollars is at stake. Although I do not impugn the conscious honesty of my opponent's witnesses, I suggest that their recollection has been colored by dollar signs.

MR. ASJ: Is counsel making an argument or writing a Panty scenario?

MR. LECKY: It is an established fact that men remember what they want to remember, and forget what they want to forget. They do this in all sincerity. Objective truth does not exist in the psychoanalytic sense, and our courts have affirmed and reaffirmed the psychoanalytic principle in a long line of cases.

THE COURT: This court is acquainted with the precedents, Mr. Lecky, but the present cause of action does not lie with them.

MR. ASJ: There never yet has

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been a case where a peeper was admitted to give evidence, and if counsel imagines he's going to ring in a—

MR. LECKY: What are you afraid of? If your witnesses are telling the truth, my man will peep them and confirm it. But if they're lying as I suggest—

THE COURT: Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Such exchanges cannot be countenanced. The court is cognizant of the fact that Extra Sensory Experts perform valuable services for society in many walks of life . . . the Esper Medical Doctor, the Esper Attorney, the Esper Educator, the Esper Criminologist . . . to mention only a few; yet the Esper Expert cannot properly be admitted to any court to give Esper evidence for the record.

MR. LECKY: It cannot be ruled an invasion of privacy, your honor, any more than a snapshot of a nude sunbather can be ruled an invasion of modesty. Three hundred years ago the human body was imagined to be a thing of shame. Concealment was the strange custom of the day. Two hundred years ago, the human mind was imagined to be a thing of shame. Concealment was the strange custom of that time. But we have progressed far beyond such medieval concepts.

THE COURT: Very true, Mr. Lecky, but human justice has not yet abandoned the established principle that a man cannot be used as a hostile witness against himself. A man cannot be forced to convict himself of subconscious mendacity. Justice must always remain on the objective level. If it does not, what would become of the deluded innocents who falsely believe in their own guilt? How would the courts reconcile their subjective confessions with their objective innocence? The objection is sustained.

* * *

IN 2300, the *Sacrament III* carefully quartering the East Quadrant of Mars for FO (fissionable ore) discovered the remains of marrying Alan Courtney. He had survived his landing some two years, eking out his dwindling supplies with lichens and the dew that formed on the surface of his starship. There were scars and rust particles on his tongue.

Evidently he had gone insane, for they found his dessicated body genuflected before a rock on which the symbol of the Order of Python had been cut.

The symbol, a serpent coiled in an infinity sign, was ignored in the reports, but they named a city after him.

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In honor of Alan Courtney, his great-grandnephew, Samuel Dus, took his name, took his twenty-five million dollars and took up residence in Courtney City on Mars.

There were other reasons. Samuel Dus-Courtney had been mauled in a financial scrimmage with old Geoffrey Reich III, and was retiring to lick his wounded bank account.

* * *

Joan Turnbul's ship, a converted Empire submarine, fell into the Three Body Problem, and follows Jupiter in his eternal course as one of the Trojans. Passing Sacrament Liners sometimes waste enough fuel to give their passengers a glimpse of her staring skeletal face framed in a crystal port. Sentimental virgins often weep pretty tears at the sad fate of the lovely (she was ugly as sin) daughter of the discoverer of Nulgee.

* * *

Van Tuerk smashed on Titan. A D'Courtney tanker found him inside his little spacecan, lying broken on the deck on which he'd chalked: *Die Kunst ist lang, das Leben kurz, die Gelegenheit flüchtig.* The D'Courtney ship also found a forty billion dollar crater of radiant magma.

"Magma Cum Laude," snorted Ben Reich when he received the news from Relations in Sacrament Tower, but he was not amused.

For Ben Reich is The Demolished Man.

II

DEMOLITION! Concussion! Explosion! The vault doors burst open. The Stellite sparks sizzle in showers of sapphires and diamonds. And deep inside, the money is racked in golden stacks ready for rape, rapine, loot. Who's that? Who's inside the vault? Oh, God! The Man With No Face! Looking. Looming. Silent. Horrible.

Run . . . Escape . . .

Run, or I'll miss the Paris Pneumatique and that girl waiting for me with her flower face and figure of passion. There's time if I run. Call to the guard. Urge him to hold the train. Run. Urge him to—

But that isn't the guard before the gate. The Man With No Face! Looking. Looming. Silent. Terrifying.

Don't scream! Stop screaming . . .

But he isn't screaming. He's singing on that stage of sparkling marble, while the music soars and the lights burn and his cascading voice envelopes the multitude out there in the amphitheatre who— But there's no one. The great shadowed pit . . . empty except

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for one spectator. Silent. Staring. Leering. Looming.

The Man With No Face!

This time his scream had sound.

Ben Reich awoke.

He lay quietly in the hydropathic bed while his heart shuddered and his eyes focused at random on objects in the room. The walls of green jade, the nightlight in the porcelain mandarin whose head nodded interminably if you touched him, the multiclock that radiated the time of three planets and nine satellites, the bed itself, a crystal pool flowing with carbonated glycerine at Speegee three and ninety-nine point nine Fahrenheit.

The door opened softly and Jonas appeared in the gloom, a shadow in puce sleeping suit, a shade with the face of a horse and the bearing of an undertaker.

"Again?" Reich asked.

"Yes, Mr. Reich."

"Loud?"

"Very loud, sir. And terrified."

"Damn your jackass ears," Reich growled. "I'm never afraid."

"No, sir."

"Get out."

"Yes, sir. Good night, sir." Jonas stepped back and closed the door.

Reich shouted: "Jonas!"

The valet reappeared.

"Sorry, Jonas."

"Quite all right, sir."

"It isn't all right." Reich charmed him with a smile. "Next time I yell at you, yell right back. Why should I have all the fun?"

"Oh, Mr. Reich . . ."

"Do that and you get a raise." The smile again. "That's all, Jonas. Thank you."

"Thank you, sir." The valet withdrew.

Reich arose from the bed and toweled himself before the cheval mirror, practicing the smile. "Make your enemies by choice," he muttered, "not by accident." He stared at the reflection: the heavy shoulders, deep chest, narrow flanks, long corded legs . . . the sleek head with wide eyes, small chiseled nose, small sensitive mouth scarred by implacability.

"Why?" he asked. "I wouldn't change looks with the devil. I wouldn't change places with God. Why the screaming?"

He put on a gown and glanced at the clock. It was a little after six. He would give himself an hour of analysis. The screaming had to stop.

"But I'm not afraid," he said. "I'm never afraid."

He stepped down a corridor, clacking his sandals sharply on the silver floor, indifferent to the slumber of his staff, unaware that this early morning skeletal clatter awakened twelve hearts to

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hatred and dread. He thrust open the door of his analyst's suite, entered and at once lay down on the couch.

Wilson Breen, E.M.D.2, was already awake and ready for him. As Reich's staff analyst he slept the 'nurse's sleep' in which he remained *en rapport* with his patient and could instantly be awakened by his needs. That one scream had been enough for Breen. Now he was seated alongside the couch, elegant in embroidered gown and sharply alert, for his employer was generous but demanding.

"Go ahead, Mr. Reich."

"The Man With No Face again," Reich said.

"Nightmares?"

"Peep me and find out! Sorry. Childish of me. Yes, nightmares again. I was trying to rob a bank. Then I was trying to catch a train. Then someone was singing. Me, I think. I'm trying to give you the pictures best I can. I don't think I'm leaving anything out . . ." There was a long pause. Finally Reich blurted: "Well?"

"You persist that you cannot identify The Man With No Face, Mr. Reich?"

"How the hell can I? I never see it. All I know is—"

"I think you can. You simply will not."

"Listen," Reich burst out in guilty rage. "I pay you twenty thousand a year. If the best you can do is make idiotic statements . . ."

"Do you mean that, Mr. Reich, or is it simply a part of the general anxiety syndrome?"

"There is no anxiety," Reich shouted. "I'm not afraid. I'm never—" He stopped himself, realizing the futility of ranting while the deft mind of the peeper searched underneath his aggressive words. "You're wrong, anyway," he said sulkily. "I don't know who it is. It's a man with no face. That's all."

"You've been rejecting the essential points, Mr. Reich. You must be made to see them. We'll try a little free association. Without words, please. Robbery . . ."

"*Jewels - watches - diamonds - stocks - bonds - sovereigns - counterfeiting - cash - bullion - dort . . .*"

"What was that last again?"

"*Slip of the mind. Meant to think bort . . . uncut gem stones.*"

"It was not a slip. It was a significant correction; or, rather, alteration. Let's continue. Pneumatique . . ."

"*Long car-compartments-air-conditioned . . .* That doesn't make sense."

"It does, Mr. Reich. An unconscious phallic pun. Read 'heir' for 'air' and you'll see it. Continue, please."

"You peeper snoopers are too

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damned smart. Let's see. Pneumatique . . . *train-underground-compressed air-ultrasonic speed-'We Transport You Into Transports', slogan of the—what the hell is the name of that company? Can't remember. Where'd the notion come from anyway?*"

"From the pre-conscious, Mr. Reich. One more trial and you'll begin to understand. Amphitheater . . ."

"*Seats - pits - balcony - boxes - stalls - horse stalls - Martian horses - Martian Pampas . . .*"

"And there you have it, Mr. Reich. In the past six months you've had ninety-seven nightmares about The Man With No Face. He's been your constant enemy, frustrater and inspirer of terror in dreams that contain three common denominators . . . Finance, Transportation, and Mars. Over and over again . . . The Man With No Face, and Finance, Transportation and Mars."

"That doesn't mean anything to me."

"It must mean something, Mr. Reich. You must be able to identify this terrifying figure. Why else would you attempt to escape by rejecting his face?"

"I'm not rejecting anything."

"I offer as further clues the altered word 'dort' and the forgotten name of the company that coined the advertising slogan 'We Transport You Into—'"

"I tell you I don't know who it is." Reich arose abruptly from the couch. "Your clues don't help. I can't make any identification."

"The Man With No Face does not fill you with fear because he's faceless. You know who he is. You hate him and fear him, but you know who he is."

"You're the peeper, damn you! You tell me!"

"There's a limit to my ability, Mr. Reich. I can read your mind no deeper without help."

"What do you mean, help? You're the best man I could hire. If—"

"Mr. Reich, you deliberately hired a 2nd Class Esper in order to protect yourself in such an emergency. Now you're paying the price of your caution. If you want the screaming to stop, you'll have to consult one of the 1st Class men—Augustus T8 or Gart or Samuel @kins . . ."

"I'll think about it," Reich muttered and turned to go. As he opened the door, Breen called: "By the way, 'We Transport You Into Transports' is the slogan of the D'Courtney Cartel. How does that tie in with the alteration of 'bort' to 'dort'? Think it over."

"*The Man With No Face!*"

Without staggering, Reich slammed the door across the path from his mind to Breen and then

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lurched down the corridor toward his own suite. A wave of savage hatred burst over him.

"Craye D'Courtney. The Man With No Face. He's right, the smart son of a bitch. It's D'Courtney who's giving me the screams. Not because I'm afraid of him. I'm afraid of myself. Known all along. Known it deep down inside. Known that once I faced it I'd have to kill D'Courtney. He has no face because it's the face of murder."

FULLY dressed and in his wrong mind, Reich stormed out of his apartment and descended to the street where a Sacrament Jumper picked him up and carried him in one graceful hop to the giant tower that housed the hundreds of floors and thousands of employees of Sacrament's New York office.

Sacrament Tower was the central nervous system of an incredibly vast corporation, a pyramid of transportation, communication, heavy industry, manufacture, sales distribution, research, exploration, importation. Sacrament bought and sold, made and destroyed, traded and gave. Its pattern of subsidiaries and holding companies was so complex that it demanded the full-time services of a 2nd Class Esper Accountant.

Reich entered his office, followed by his chief (Esper 3) secretary and her staff, bearing the litter of the morning's work.

"Dump it and jet," he ordered surlily.

They deposited the papers and recording crystals on his desk and departed hastily but without rancor. They were accustomed to his rages. Reich seated himself behind his desk, trembling with a fury that was already goring D'Courtney. Finally he muttered: "I'll give the bastard one more chance."

He unlocked his desk, opened the drawer-safe and withdrew the Executive's Code Book, restricted to the executive heads of the firms listed quadruple A-1-* by Lloyd's. He found most of the material he required in the middle pages of the book:

QQBA	PARTNERSHIP
RRCB	BOTH OUR
SSDC	BOTH YOUR
TTED	MERGER
UUFE	INTERESTS
VVGF	INFORMATION
WWHG	ACCEPT OFFER
XXIH	GENERALLY KNOWN
YYJI	SUGGEST
ZZKJ	CONFIDENTIAL
AALK	EQUAL
BBML	CONTRACT

Marking his place in the code book, Reich flipped the phone on and said to the image of the

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inter-office operator: "Get me Code."

The screen dazzled and cut to a smoky room cluttered with books and coils of tape. A bleached man in a faded shirt glanced at the screen, then leaped to attention.

"Yes, Mr. Reich?"

"Morning, Hassop. You look like you need a vacation. *Make your enemies by choice.* Take a week at Ampro. Sacrament expense."

"Thank you, Mr. Reich. Thank you very much."

"This message is confidential. To Craye D'Courtney. Relations will tell you where to find him. Send—" Reich consulted the Code Book. "Send YYJI TTED RRCB UUFE AALK QQBA. Get the answer to me like rockets."

"Right, Mr. Reich. I'll jet."

Reich cut off the phone. He jabbed his hand once into the pile of papers and crystals on his desk, picked up a crystal and dropped it into the playback. His chief secretary's voice said: "Sacrament Gross off two point one one three four per cent. D'Courtney Gross up two point one one three oh per cent . . ."

"Out of my pocket into his!" He snapped off the playback and arose in an agony of impatience. It would take hours for the reply to reach Mars and return. His whole life hung on D'Courtney's reply.

He left his office and began to roam through the floors and departments of Sacrament Tower, pretending the remorseless personal supervision he usually exercised. His chief secretary unobtrusively accompanied him like a trained dog.

"*Trained bitch!*" Reich thought. Then, aloud: "I'm sorry. Did you peep that?"

"Quite all right, Mr. Reich, I understand."

"Do you? I don't. God damn D'Courtney!"

In Personnel they were testing, checking and screening the usual mass of job applicants . . . clerks, craftsmen, specialists, middle-bracket executives, top drawer experts. All the preliminary elimination was done with standardized tests and interviews, and never to the satisfaction of Sacraments Esper Personnel chief, who was stalking through the floor in an icy rage when Reich entered. The fact that Reich's secretary sent an advance telepathic announcement of the visit made no difference to him.

"I have allotted ten minutes per applicant for my final screening interview," the chief was snapping to his worried crew. "Six per hour. Forty-eight per day. Unless my percentage of final rejections drops below thir-

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ty-five, I am wasting my time; which means that you are wasting Sacrament's time. I am not employed by Sacrament to screen out the obviously unsuitable. That is your work. See to it." He turned to Reich and nodded pedantically. "Good morning, Mr. Reich."

"Morning. Trouble?"

"Nothing that cannot be handled once this staff understands that Extra Sensory Perception is not a miracle but a skill subject to wage-hour requirements. What is your decision on Blogg, Mr. Reich?"

Secretary: *"He hasn't read your memo yet."*

"May I point out, madam, that unless I am used with maximum efficiency, I am wasted. The Blogg memo has been on Mr. Reich's desk for three days."

"Tell him about it now."

"It will consume three minutes which will cost my department fifteen hundred dollars. My time is rated at—"

"Tell him anyway. He's in a temper."

"Who the hell is Blogg?" Reich asked.

"First, the background, Mr. Reich: There are approximately one hundred thousand 3rd Class Espers in the Esper Guild. An Esper 3 can peep the conscious level of a mind. The 3rd can discover what a subject is thinking at the moment of thought. The 3rd is the lowest class of telepaths. Most of Sacrament's security positions are held by 3rds. We employ over five hundred . . ."

"For God's sake, he knows all this. Everybody does. Get to the point, long-winded!"

"Permit me to arrive at the point in my own way, madam."

"How did you ever get into Personnel, gas-bag? You're a born bad lecturer."

"There are approximately ten thousand 2nd Class Espers in the Guild," the Personnel chief continued frostily. "They are experts like myself who can penetrate beneath the conscious level of the mind to the preconscious. Most 2nds are in the professional class . . . physicians, lawyers, engineers, educators, economists, architects and so on."

"And you cost a fortune," Reich growled.

"We have unique service to sell. Sacrament appreciates that fact. Sacrament employs over one hundred 2nds at present."

"Will you get to the point? If he wasn't so mad at D'Courtney, he'd have your head off by now."

"There are less than a thousand 1st Class Espers in the Guild. The 1sts are capable of deep peeping, through the conscious and preconscious layers down to the unconscious, the lowest levels of the mind. Primordial

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basic desires and so forth. These Espers, of course, hold premium positions. Education, specialized medical service . . . analysts like T8, Gart, @kins, Moselle . . . criminologists like Preston Powell of the Psychotic Division . . . Political Analysts, State Negotiators, Special Cabinet Advisers and so on. Thus far Sacrament has never had occasion to hire a 1st."

"And?" Reich demanded.

"The occasion has arisen, Mr. Reich, and I believe Blogg may be available. Briefly . . ."

"It says here."

"Briefly, Sacrament is hiring so many Espers that I have suggested we set up a special Esper Personnel Department, headed by a 1st like Blogg to devote itself exclusively to the work."

"He's wondering why you can't handle it."

"I have given you the background to explain why I cannot handle the job, Mr. Reich. I am a 2nd Class Esper. I can telepath normal applicants rapidly and efficiently, but I cannot handle other Espers with the same speed and efficiency. All Espers are accustomed to using mind blocks of varying effectiveness depending on their rating. It would take me one hour per 3rd for an efficient screening interview. It would take me three hours per 2nd. I could not possibly peep a 1st. We must hire a 1st like Blogg for this work. The cost will be large, but the necessity is urgent.'

"What's so urgent?" Reich said.

"For God's sake, don't give him that picture! He's sore enough about D'Courtney."

"I have my job to do, madam."

To Reich, the chief said: "We are not hiring the best Espers, Mr. Reich. The D'Courtney Cartel has been taking the cream of the Espers away from us. Over and over again, through lack of proper facilities, we have been tricked by D'Courtney into bidding for inferior people while D'Courtney has quietly appropriated the best."

"God damn you!" Reich shouted. "God damn D'Courtney. All right, set it up. And tell this Blogg to start mouse-trapping D'Courtney. You'd better start, too."

He left Personnel and went down to Sales, where a copy-check was being run on an audience of one hundred people selected at random from the streets. They were seated in the small theater, watching a test run of advertising copy, while the Esper Sales chief peeped their reactions and responses. Warned by Reich's secretary, he dropped his work at once and came up to Reich, his face perplexed and annoyed.

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"Morning, Mr. Reich."

"Morning. Trouble?"

"Save it. Save it. Don't spill anything."

"Got to, girlie. It's a crisis."

"Bub, you only think it's a crisis. The boss is—"

"I wish you could peep that audience, Mr. Reich. How does D'Courtney do it?"

"Do what?"

"Build that hostility toward us." The Sales chief waved at the people in the chairs. "They think all our products are shoddy substitutes for D'Courtney's. They think every bit of our copy is an outrageous lie. That damned Cartel's instilled patriotism! They feel it'd be an act of treachery to settle for anything less than D'Courtney."

"Who's handling their Public Relations? Whoever it is, get him."

"He's a she, Mr. Reich," the secretary said. "An Esper 2. And incorruptible."

"Who said anything about corruption?"

"You didn't say it, Mr. Reich, but we tried."

"I'll fix him!" Reich shouted.

He stormed up to Propaganda, where the department chief was rapidly peeping a battery of field-researchers, all 3rds, all back from Continental Africa, and all apparently with discouraging news.

"Morning," Reich interrupted. "Trouble?"

The Propaganda chief ignored the secretary's warning and nodded dismally. "Let's face it," he said. "We're being licked."

"D'Courtney?"

"D'Courtney. You name any place on any planet or satellite, and that's where D'Courtney's the Great White Father. If Sacrament tried to give anything away, they'd refuse to accept."

"We're dropping all campaigns as of now. Never mind whitewashing Sacrament. Start mudslinging D'Courtney. I want smear. Attack him. Villify him. He robs banks. He rapes widows. He cheats orphans. He—"

"Got your picture," the peeper interrupted. "What about slander?"

"Who gives a damn for the law? Let him sue. He'll be smeared by the time he gets to court. Pass the word for Legal to meet in my office."

Reich returned to his office where the Legal chief, forewarned by the lightning telepathic grapevine, was already waiting with Reich's picture in his mind.

"You can't do it, Mr. Reich," he said. "D'Courtney'll sue and collect."

"One way or another, D'Courtney'll bust Sacrament wide open if we don't fight. Go peep Accounting for the picture."

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"I've got the picture from you, sir."

"Then get back to your department and start preparing a defense. Propaganda's going to start a full campaign . . . whisper, overt, blatant. I'm using an old fighting trick. If you can't attack the argument, attack the man. I want D'Courtney attacked, legally and illegally. You're forewarned. We're going to break a few laws . . .".

"A few hundred."

"All right. Hit D'Courtney with suits before he hits us. Accuse him of everything we're going to do to him. Start every civil and criminal action against him that we'll be guilty of. This is a fight for survival. Pass the word and get the hell out of here."

After the Legal chief was gone, Reich paced in a fury for five minutes. "It's no use," he muttered. "I know I'll have to kill the bastard. He won't accept. Why should he accept? He thinks he's licked me. Damn him, he has licked me. All this is just loud talk. I'll have to kill him. And I'll need some real help . . . peeper help."

He flipped on the phone and told the operator:

"Relations."

A sparkling lounge appeared on the screen, decorated in chrome and enamel, equipped with game tables and a bar dispenser. It appeared to be and was used as a recreation center. It was, in fact, headquarters of Sacrament's powerful espionage division. The Recreation director, a bearded scholar named West, looked up from a chess problem, then leaped to attention.

"Good morning, Mr. Reich."

Warned by the formal 'Mister' Reich said: "Good morning, Mr. West. Just a routine check. Paternalism, you know. How's amusement these days?"

"Modulated, Mr. Reich. However, I must complain. I think there's entirely too much gambling going on." West stalled in a fussy voice until two bona fide Sacrament clerks innocently finished their drinks and departed. Then he relaxed and slumped into his chair. "All clear, Ben. Shoot."

"Has Hassop broken the confidential code yet, Ellery?"

THE peeper shook his head bitterly.

"Trying?"

West smiled and nodded.

"Where's D'Courtney?"

"En route to Terra, aboard the *Astra*."

"Know his plans? Where he'll be staying?"

"No. Want a check?"

"I don't know. It depends . . ."

"Depends on what?" West glanced at him curiously. "I wish

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the Telepathic Pattern could be transmitted by phone, Ben. I'd like to know what you're driving at."

Reich smiled grimly. "Thank God for the phone. It protects us from TP invasion. What's your personal attitude toward crime, Ellery?"

"Typical."

"Of anybody?"

"Of the Esper Guild. The Guild doesn't like it, Ben."

"You're a sharp character, Ellery. You know the value of money, success. Why don't you clever up? Why do you let the Guild do your thinking?"

"You don't understand. We're born in the Guild. We live with the Guild. We die in the Guild. We have the right to elect Guild officers, and that's all. The Guild runs our professional lives. It trains us, grades us, sets ethical standards and sees that we stick to them. It protects us by protesting the layman. Same as medical associations. We have the equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath. It's called the Galen Pledge. God help any of us if we break it . . . as I judge you're suggesting I should."

"Maybe I am," Reich said intently. "Maybe I'm hinting it could be worth your while to break the Guild pledge. Maybe I'm thinking in terms of money . . . more than you or any 2nd Class peeper would see in a lifetime."

"Forget it, Ben. Not interested."

"So bust your pledge. What happens?"

"We're ostracized."

"Smart peepers have broken with the Guild before. They've been ostracized. What of it?"

WEST smiled wryly. "You wouldn't understand, Ben."

"Make me understand."

"Those peepers you mention, like Jeremy Church. They weren't so smart. It's like this . . ." West considered. "Before surgery really got started, there used to be a handicapped group called deaf-mutes."

"No-hear no-talk?"

"That's it. They communicated by a manual sign language. That meant they couldn't communicate with anybody but deaf-mutes. Understand? They had to live in their own community or they couldn't live at all. A man goes crazy if he can't have friends."

"So?"

"Some of them started a racket. They'd tax the more successful deaf-mutes for weekly handouts. If the victim refused to pay, they'd ostracize him. The victim always paid. It was a choice of paying or living in solitary until he went mad."

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"You mean you peepers are like deaf-mutes?"

"No, Ben. You non-Espers are the deaf-mutes. If we had to live with you alone, we'd go mad. Now for God's sake, leave me alone. I've got work to do. If you're planning something dirty, I don't want to know."

West cut off the phone in Reich's face. With a roar of rage, Reich snatched up a gold paperweight and hurled it into the crystal screen. Before the shattered fragments finished flying, he slammed the door of his office and was on his way out of the building.

HIS secretary knew where he was going. His peeper chauffeur knew where he wanted to go. Reich arrived in his apartment and was met by his peeper house-supervisor, who at once announced early luncheon and tuned the meal to Reich's unspoken demands. Feeling slightly less violent, Reich stalked into his study and turned to his safe, which was a mere shimmer of light in the corner.

It was simply a honeycomb paper rack tuned out of temporal phase with a single-cycle beat. Once a second, when the safe phase and temporal phase coincided, the rack pulsed with a brilliant glow. The safe could be switched back into full temporal phase only by the pore-pattern of Reich's right index finger, which was irreproduceable.

Reich placed the tip of his finger in the center of the glow. It faded and the honeycomb rack appeared. Holding his finger in place, he reached up and took down a small black notebook and a large red envelope clearly lettered: TO BE OPENED IN CASE OF MURDER.

He removed his index finger and the safe pulsed out of temporal phase again.

Reich flipped through the pages of the notebook . . . ABDUCTION . . . ABORTION . . . ANARCHISTS . . . ARSONISTS . . . BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION (ALREADY) . . . BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION (POSSIBLE) . . . Under POSSIBLE, he found the names of fifty-seven prominent people. One of them was Augustus T8, Esper Medical Doctor 1. He nodded with satisfaction.

He tore open the red envelope and examined its contents. It contained five sheets of closely written pages in a handwriting that was centuries old. Four of the pages were lettered: PLAN A, PLAN B, PLAN C, PLAN D. The fifth was headed INTRODUCTION. Reich read the ancient spidery script slowly:

To those who come after me:
The test of intellect is the refusal

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to belabor the obvious. If you have opened this letter, we already understand each other. I have prepared four general murder plans which may help you. I bequeath them to you as part of the Reich inheritance. They are only outlines. The details must be filled in by yourself as your time and necessity require.

But remember this: The essence of murder never changes. It is always the conflict of the killer against society with the victim as the prize. And the ABC of conflict with society never changes. Be audacious, be brave, be confident and you will not fail. Against these qualities society has no defense.

Geoffrey Reich

Reich leafed through the plans slowly, speculatively, filled with admiration for the great old pirate who had had the forethought and ingenuity to perform this work for his descendants. His imagination kindled and ideas began forming and crystalizing to be considered, discarded and instantly replaced.

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One remarkable phrase caught his attention: *If you are a natural killer, don't plan too carefully. Leave most to your instinct. Intellect may fail you, but the killer's instinct is infallible.*

"The killer's instinct," Reich breathed. "By God, I've got that."

The phone chimed once and then the automatic switched on. There was a quick chatter and tape began to stutter out of the recorder. Reich strode to the desk and examined it.

The message was very short and very deadly:

CODE TO REICH: REPLY WWHG.

"Offer refused. I knew it. I knew it!" Reich gritted. "All right, D'Courtney. If you won't let it be merger, then it's going to be murder."

III

AUGUSTUS T8, E.M.D.1, received $1,000 per hour of analysis—not a high fee considering that you rarely required more than an hour of the doctor's devastating time—but it placed his income at $8,000 a day, $40,000 a week, or $2 million a year. The public knew his income, but it did not know what proportion of that income was paid into the Esper Guild for the education of other Espers and the furthering of the Guild's long-range eugenic plan to bring Extra Sensory Perception to every person in all the worlds.

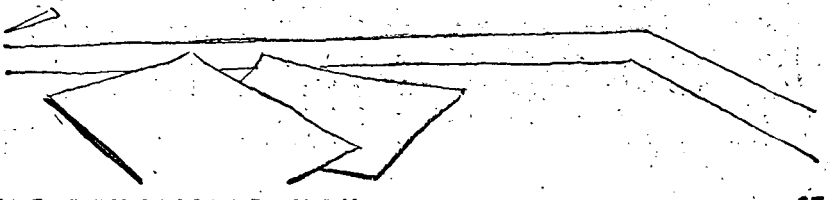
Augustus T8 knew, and the 95% he paid was a sore point with him. Because of it, he was not fully reconciled to the Galen Pledge. Almost, but not quite. It was the "not quite" that placed him in Ben Reich's BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION (POSSIBLE) category.

Reich marched into T8's overpowering consultation room, glanced once at T8's tiny figure, slightly out of proportion, carefully realigned by tailors, then sat down and grunted:

"Peep me quick."

He glared in concentration at T8 while the elegant little peeper examined him with a glittering eye and spoke in quick staccato bursts:

"You're Ben Reich of Sacrament. Ten billion dollar firm. You think I should know you. I do.



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"A 1st Class Esper? Am I supposed to believe it? Am I supposed to believe you're incapable of outwitting the whole world?"

T8 smiled. "Sugar for the fly," he said. "A characteristic device of—"

"Peep me," Reich interrupted. "It'll save time. Read what's in my mind. Your gift. My resources. An unbeatable combination. My God, it's lucky for the Solar System I'm willing to stop at one murder!"

"No," T8 said with decision. "It won't do. I'll have to commit you, Mr. Reich."

"Wait. Want to find out why that payment thought was cloudy? Read me deeper. How much am I willing to pay? What's my top limit?"

T8 closed his eyes. His mannequin face tightened painfully. Then his eyes opened in surprise. "You can't be serious!" he exclaimed.

"I am," Reich grunted. "And what's more, you know it's an offer in good faith, don't you?"

T8 nodded slowly.

"And you're aware that Sacrament plus D'Courtney can make the offer good."

"I almost believe you."

"You can believe me. I throw my combined resources at your disposal. I guarantee to satisfy every whim, every desire, every You're involved in a death struggle with the D'Courtney Cartel. You're savagely hostile toward D'Courtney. Offered merger this morning. Offer refused. In desperation you have resolved to—" T8 broke off abruptly.

"Go ahead," Reich said.

"To murder Craye D'Courtney as the first step in taking over his cartel. You need my help. You offer me—that thought's vague."

"One million dollars. In secret. Tax free. Guild free."

"Ridiculous."

"Peep me. What's in my pocket?"

"Five uncut emeralds valued at twenty thousand dollars each. If you keep on like this, Mr. Reich, I'll have to commit you."

"One hundred thousand dollars down payment. Untraceable. Yours."

Reich withdrew the stones from his pocket and tossed them on the desk, where they rolled like cloudy green pebbles. T8 stared at them.

"One hundred thousand a week for ten weeks. The murder can't take any longer. No record. No implication. All safe. Still thinking of committing me?"

"It can't be done," T8 said, hungrily not touching the cold stones.

"It can be done with your help."

"I can do nothing to help you."

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inclination you may have for the rest of your life. Read me. Am I sincere? Will I hold to my word?"

"You will," T8 admitted with extreme reluctance.

"Will you accept or commit? And don't forget . . . I can fight a committal. Don't ever imagine I can't."

"The bribe is too big," T8 said, his face beginning to strain again. "You can't possibly hate D'Courtney with that much ferocity. I'm trying to discover why the bribe is too big."

"Don't bother. I'll tell you. You want to enjoy the world. I want to own the world. So long as I own it, I'm willing to let you enjoy it."

T8 picked up the stones and fingered them. He closed his eyes and said: "There hasn't been a successful premeditated murder in 79 years. Espers make it impossible to conceal intent before the murder. Or, if Espers have been evaded before the murder, they make it impossible to conceal the guilt."

"Esper evidence isn't admitted in court."

"TRUE, but once an Esper discovers the guilt he can uncover objective evidence to support his peeping. Powell, the Prefect of the Psychotic Division, is deadly." T8 opened his eyes. "Do you want your emeralds back?"

"No," Reich said. "Look the situation over with me first. Murders have always failed because no killer had the sense to hire a good peeper, or at least, if he had the sense, he couldn't afford the deal. I can."

"Yes, you can."

"I'm going to fight a war," Reich continued. "I'm going to fight one sharp skirmish with society. Let's look at it as a problem in strategy and tactics. My problem's that of any army. Audacity, bravery and confidence aren't enough. An army needs Intelligence. A war is won with Intelligence. I need you for my G-2."

"Agreed."

"I'll do the fighting. You'll procure the Intelligence. I'll have to know where D'Courtney will be, where I can strike, when I can strike. I'll take care of the killing myself, but you'll have to tell me when and where the opportunity will be."

"Understood."

"I'll have to invade first . . . cut through a defensive network surrounding D'Courtney. That means reconnaissance from you. You'll have to run interference, check the normals, spot the peepers, warn me and block them if I can't avoid them. You'll have to remain on the scene after the

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murder. You'll find out whom the police suspect and why. If I know suspicion is directed against myself, I can divert it. If I know it's directed against someone else, I can clinch it. I can fight this war and win this war with your Intelligence. Is that the truth? Peep me."

After a long pause, T8 said: "It's the truth. We can do it." He picked up the emeralds and dropped them into his pocket with finality. "There's to be a social gathering tonight at Preston Powell's house. D'Courtney's physician will be there. I'll start the reconnaissance. Maybe I'll locate D'Courtney's plans and destination for you. I think I can."

"And you're not afraid of 'the deadly Powell'?"

T8 smiled contemptuously. "If I were, Mr. Reich, would I trust myself in this bargain with you? Make no mistake, I'm no Jeremy Church."

"Church!"

"Yes. The Esper 2nd. He was kicked out of the Guild ten years ago for that little junket of his with you."

"Damn you. Got that from me, eh?"

"You and history."

"Well, it won't repeat itself this time. You're tougher and smarter than Church. Need anything special for Powell's party? Women? Clothes? Jewels? Money?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Criminal but generous, that's me." Reich smiled as he arose to go. He did not offer to shake hands.

"Mr. Reich!" T8 called suddenly.

Reich turned at the door.

"The screaming will continue. The Man With No Face is not a symbol of D'Courtney or murder."

"What? Oh, Christ, the nightmares. Still? How did you get that? How did you—"

"Don't be a fool. Do you think you can play games like that with a 1st?"

"What about the damned nightmares?"

"No, I shan't tell you. I doubt if anyone but a 1st can tell you, and naturally you would not dare to consult another after this conference."

"For God's sake, man! Are you going to help me?"

"No, Mr. Reich," T8 smiled malevolently. "That's my little weapon. It keeps us on a parity basis. Criminal but peeper . . . that's me."

LIKE all upper grade Espers, Preston Powell, Ph.D.1, lived in a private house. It was not a question of conspicuous consumption, but rather a problem of privacy. Life in any multiple

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dwelling was life in an inferno of naked emotion for an Esper, especially an Esper 1st.

Powell occupied a small limestone maisonette on Hudson Ramp, overlooking the North River. There were only four rooms—upstairs, a bedroom and study; downstairs, a living room and kitchen. The interior walls were translucent nacre, at present colored oyster white with scounces, mouldings and Adam mantles projected on them. The polymorph furniture was currently shaped into Sheraton and Hepplewhite reproductions. All Espers required frequent sensory restimulation, and he was now in his Georgian period.

There was no servant in the house; he preferred to do for himself. He was in the kitchen, checking over the stasis-freeze in preparation for the party, whistling a plaintive, crooked tune, a slender man in his late thirties, tall, loose, slow-moving. His cropped hair was prematurely white; a startling contrast to the jet black eyebrows and deep dark eyes. His nose was big, thrusting, almost arrogant. His wide mouth seemed perpetually on the verge of laughter.

If you looked at the lower half of Powell's face, you said this must be the funniest man in the world. If you looked at the upper half, you were sure he was the saddest man in the world. If you asked him, he would answer that he was both or neither or anything, depending on the situation, the questioner and the reason for the question.

For it was the essence of the Esper that he, too, was polymorph . . . a personality of many shapes and many quantities. There was no consistent public character; there was only consistent response to the requirements of all situations. Sensitive to the demands of the psyche, the Esper gave you the response you really wanted and it was this responsive quality that made Espers fantastically popular. Layman pursued them endlessly, offering friendship and fraternity, marriage and maternity; and the Espers fled desperately, unable to explain to the deaf-mutes that these were unilateral offers . . . that there could be no genuine relationship between all-giver and all-taker . . . that only Espers could give to each other with any sort of equality.

THE doorbell chimed. Powell glanced at his watch in surprise—it was too early—then directed *Open* in C-sharp at the TP Locksenser.

It responded to the Thought Pattern and the front door slid open.

Instantly came a familiar sen-

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sory impact: Snow/mint/tulips/taffeta.

"Mary Noyes. Come to help the bachelor prepare for the party. Blessings."

"Hoped you'd need me, Pres."

"Every host needs a hostess. Mary, what am I going to do for Canapes s.o.s.?"

"Just invented a new recipe. I'll make it for you. Roast chutney &."

"&?"

"That's telling, my love."

"Oh-ho. That kind of can(secret)ape?"

She came into the kitchen, a short girl externally, but tall and swaying in thought; a dark girl exteriorly, but frost white in pattern. Almost a nun in white, despite the swarthy texture of externals; but Thought Pattern was the real reality. You are what you think.

"Then I wish I could re-think, Pres. Have my synapses reground."

"Change your (I kiss you as you are) self, Mary?"

"If I only (You never really do, Pres) could. I'm so tired of tasting you tasting mint every time we meet."

"Next time I'll add brandy and ice. Shake well. Voila. Stinger-Mary."

"Do that. Also (strike out) snow."

"Why strike out the snow? I love snow."

"But I love you."

"And I love you, Mary."

"Thanks, Pres." But he had said it. He always said it, never thought it. She turned away quickly and began fumbling with the drink ampules in the freeze. The tears unshed within her scalded him.

"Again, Mary?"

"Not again. Always." And the deeper levels of her mind cried: *"I love you, Pres. I love you. Image of my father: symbol of security: Of warmth: Of protecting passion: Do not reject me always."*

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"Listen to me, Mary . . ."

"Don't talk. Please, Pres. Not in words. I couldn't bear it if words came between us."

"You're my friend, Mary. Snow. Mint. Tulips. Taffeta. Cool and swaying. For every weary moment in my life. For every disappointment. For every singular elation."

"But not for love."

"Don't let it hurt you so. Not for love."

"I have enough love, God pity me, for both of us, Pres."

"One, God pity us, is not enough for both, Mary."

"You must marry before you're forty. The Guild insists on that. You know it."

"I know it."

"What are you waiting for, Pres?"

"A wife I can love."

"Let friendship answer. Marry me, Pres. Give me a year, that's all. One little year to love you. I'll let you go. I won't cling. I won't make you hate me. Darling, it's so little to ask . . . so little to give . . ."

"But you're asking more than either of us could give. If we were non-Espers, we might make it work. But we're not."

Her hands became tight fists pressing against her hips.

He shook his head. *"You see, Mary? You're loathing yourself for being an Esper, envying deaf-mutes their watery loves."*

"But if I became a 1st . . ."

The doorbell chimed. Powell looked at Mary helplessly. "Guests," he murmured and directed *Open* in C-sharp at the TP lock-senser. At the same instant she directed *Close* a fifth above. The harmonics meshed and the door remained shut.

"Answer me first, Pres."

"I can't give you the answer you want, Mary."

The doorbell chimed again.

"For God's sake, be honest. Say it."

He took her shoulders firmly, held her close and looked deep into her eyes. *"You're a 2nd. Read me as deeply as you can. What's in my heart? What's in my mind?"*

He removed all blocks. The thundering, plunging depths of his mind cascaded over her in a warm, frightening, exalted torrent, terrifying, yet magnetic and desirable; but . . .

"Snow. Mint. Tulips. Taffeta," she said wearily. *"Go meet your guests, Pres. I'll make your canapes. It's all I'm good for."*

He kissed her once, with compassion, then turned toward the living room and opened the front door.

Instantly a fountain of telepathic brilliance sparkled into the house, followed by the guests.

The Esper party began.

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Frankly, Ellery, I don't think we'll be working for Sacrament much longer. The Guild President.

Canapes? Thanks, delicious. Mary, they're treating me. Canapes? D'Courtney. I expect him in town very shortly.

Why yes, I'm T8, you'll Brought Galen along to help him celebrate. He's just taken his Guild Exam and been classed 2nd.

If you're interested, about Powell, we're ready to run rule you for espionage unethical.

Canapes? Why, yes. Thank you, Mary . . .

"@kins! Chervil! T8! Have a heart! Will you people take a look at the Thought Pattern (?) we've been weaving?"

The TP chatter stopped. The guests burst into laughter.

"This reminds me of my days in the kindergarten. A little mercy for your host, please. I'll jump my tracks if we keep on weaving this mishmash. Let's have some order. I don't even ask for beauty."

"Just name the pattern, Pres."

"What'll you have?"

"Woven pattern? Math curves? Music? Architectural design?"

"Anything. Anything. Just so long as you don't make my brains itch."

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Sorry. Preston, We weren't party-minded Enough
T8, thought Esper
but Alan men
I'm Seaver remaining
Not that a Pres was ever elected still unmarried
at coming can
liberty but ruin
To be generous, I feel Al's a man to loa the
reveal don't Guild's
anything TP entire
about him eugenic
D'Courtney is arriving according to plan
yet

THERE was another burst of laughter when Mary Noyes was left hanging with that unarticulated "yet." She blushed with embarrassment and fought to conceal the wave of shame and humiliation linked with Powell's rejection that swept up from the lower levels of her mind.

Fortunately, the doorbell chimed again, and Alan Seaver (Solar Equity Advocate 2) entered with a girl. She was a demure little thing, surprisingly attractive outwardly, and new to the company. Her Thought Pattern was naive and not deeply responsive. Obviously a 3rd.

"Abject apologies for the delay. Orange blossoms & wedding rings are the excuse. I proposed on the way over. This is Helen Post."

"And I'm afraid I accepted," Helen said, smiling nervously.

"Don't talk," Seaver shot at her. *"This isn't a 3rd Class brawl. I told you not to use words."*

"I forgot," she blurted again, and then heated the room with her fright and shame. While Seaver glared at her, Powell stepped forward, took the girl's trembling hand and flooded her mind with warm acceptance.

"Ignore him, Helen. He's a 2nd-come-lately snob. I'm Preston Powell, your host. I Sherlock for the cops. If Alan beats you, I'll help him regret it. Come and meet your fellow telepathic freaks . . ." He conducted her around the room. *"This is Gus T8, a quack-one. Next to him, Sam & Sally @kins. Sam's another of the same. She's a baby-sitter-two . . ."*

"Sherlock can't pronounce Child Psychologist. You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen, Helen. I'm sending green threats to Sam, who'd better stop kissing you right now."

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"Th-thank — I mean, thank you."

In one lightning TP broadcast, Powell and @kins engaged in comedy mental combat for the girl's favors, while Seaver served them with summonses and Sally rubbed two Boy Scouts together to set both rivals on fire and destroy them. The girl giggled and began to relax.

"That fat man sitting on the floor is Wally Chervil, labor-two. The blonde sitting in his lap is June, his wife. June's an editor-two. That's their son, Galen, talking to Ellery West. Gally's a tech-undergrad-three . . ."

Young Galen Chervil indignantly started to point out that he'd just been classed 2nd and hadn't needed to use words in over a year. Powell cut him off below the girl's perceptive threshold and explained the reason for the deliberate mistake—he didn't want her to feel lost among all 2nds and 1sts.

"Oh," said Galen. "Yep, brother and sister 3rds, that's us, Miss Post. And am I glad you're here! These deep peepers were beginning to scare me."

"I was scared at first, but I'm not any more."

"And this is your hostess, Helen Mary Noyes."

"Hello, Helen. Canapes?"

"Thank you. They look delicious, Mrs. Powell."

"Now how about a game?" Powell interposed quickly. *"Anybody feel like playing Rebus?"*

HUDDLED in the shadow of the limestone arch, Jeremy Church pressed against the garden door of Powell's house, listening with all his soul. He was cold, silent, immobile and starved. He was resentful, hating, contemptuous and starved. He was an Esper Bar 2 and starved. The bar sinister of ostracism was the source of his hunger.

Through the thin maple panel filtered the multiple Thought Pattern of the party, a weaving, ever-changing, exhilarating design. And Church, Esper Bar 2, living on a diet of words for the past ten years, was starved for his real communication.

"The reason I mentioned D'Courtney is that I've just come across a case that might be similar."

That was T8, sucking up to @kins.

"Oh, really? Very interesting. I'd like to compare notes. Too bad D'Courtney won't—well, be available." @kins was being discreet and it smelled as though T8 was after something. Maybe not, but there certainly was some elegant block and counter-blocking going on, like duelists fencing with complicated electrical circuits.

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"Look here, Al, I think you've been pretty snotty to that poor girl."

Powell, who'd had him ostracized, preaching down his big nose at the lawyer.

"Poor girl? You mean dumb girl, Pres. My God! How gauche can you get?"

"She's only a 3rd, Al. Be fair."

"She gives me a pain."

"Do you think it's decent, marrying a girl when you feel that way about her?"

"Don't be a romantic ass, Pres. We've got to marry peepers. I may as well settle for a pretty face."

They were playing Rebus in the living room. The Noyes girl was busy building a camouflaged image with some old poem:

The sea is calm tonight,

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits;—on the French coast the vast, and Glimmering stand, England of cliffs the gone; is and Gleams light

out in the tranquil bay. Come to the window sweet is the night air. Only from the long line of spray

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What the devil was that? An eye in a glass? Not a glass. A stein. Eye in a stein. Einstein. Easy.

"What d'you think of Powell for the job, Ellery?" That was Chervil with his phony smile and his pontifical belly.

"For Guild President?"

"Yes."

"Damned efficient man. Romantic but efficient. The perfect candidate if he'd only get married."

"That's the romance in him. He's having trouble locating a girl."

"Don't all you deep peepers? Thank God I'm not a 1st."

And then a smash of glass crashing in the kitchen and Preacher Powell again, lecturing little T8.

"Never mind the glass, Gus. I had to drop it to cover for you. You're radiating anxiety like an FO star."

"The hell I am, Powell."

"The hell you're not. What's all this about Ben Reich?"

The little swine was really terrified. You could feel it blazing under the block he quickly erected.

"Ben Reich? What brought him up?"

"You did, Gus. It's been moiling in your preconscious all evening. I couldn't help latching on to it."

"Not me, Powell. You must be tuning another TP."

Image of a horse laughing.

"Powell, I swear I'm not—"

"Are you mixed up with Reich, Gus?"

"No." But you could feel the blocks bang down solidly into place.

"Well, take a hint from an old hand. Reich can get you into trouble. Be careful. Remember Jerry Church? Reich ruined him. Don't let it happen to you."

The pigmy skedaddled and Preacher Powell remained in the kitchen, calm and slow-moving, sweeping up broken glass while Church lay frozen against the back door, suppressing the hatred seething in his heart. The Chervil boy was showing off for the lawyer's girl, singing a love ballad and paralleling it with a visual parody. College stuff. The wives were arguing violently in sine curves. @kins and West were interlacing cross-conversation in a fascinatingly intricate pattern of sensory images that made his starvation keener.

"Would you like a drink, Jerry?"

The garden door opened. Powell stood silhouetted in the light, a bubbling glass in his hand. The stars lit his face softly. The deep hooded eyes were compassionate and understanding. Dazed, Church climbed to his feet and

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timidly took the proffered drink.

"Don't report this to the Guild. I'd catch hell for breaking the taboo. Poor Jerry . . . We've got to do something for you. Ten years is too long."

Church hurled the drink in Powell's face, then turned and fled, weeping invisible tears of anger and self-pity.

IV

At nine the next morning, T8's mannequin face appeared on the screen of Reich's phone.

"Is this line secure?" he asked sharply.

Reich pointed to the Warranty Seal.

"All right," T8 said. "I think I've done the job for you. I peeped @kins last night. Before I report, I must warn you—there's a chance of error when you deep-peep a 1st. @kins blocked pretty carefully."

"He would, of course."

"Craye D'Courtney arrives from Mars on the *Astra* next Wednesday morning. He will go at once to the home of Maria Beaumont, where he will be a secret and hidden guest for exactly one night."

"One night," Reich repeated. "And then? His plans?"

"I don't know. Apparently D'Courtney is planning some form of drastic action—"

"Against me!"

"Perhaps. According to @kins, D'Courtney is under some kind of violent strain and his adaptation pattern is shattering. The Life Instinct and Death Instinct have defused. He is regressing under the emotional bankruptcy very rapidly . . ."

"My life depends on this," Reich raged. "Talk straight."

"Every man is a balance of two opposed drives—the Life Instinct and the Death Instinct. Both drives have the identical purpose, to win Nirvana. The Life Instinct fights for Nirvana by smashing all opposition. The Death Instinct attempts to win Nirvana by destroying itself. Usually both instincts fuse in the adapted individual. Under strain, they defuse. That's what's happening to D'Courtney."

"Yes, by God! And he's jetting for me!"

"@kins will see D'Courtney Thursday morning in an effort to dissuade him from whatever he contemplates. @kins is afraid of it and determined to stop it."

"He won't have to stop it. I'll stop it myself. It's self-defense, T8, not murder! You've done a good job."

"This is Monday. You'll have to be ready by Wednesday."

"I'll be ready," Reich assured him grimly. "You'd better be ready too."

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"I've reconsidered," T8 said. "This is as far as I care to go."

"The hell you say."

"I've given you your essential information. Your Intelligence, you called it. I've been paid. We'll call it quits."

"Look," Reich said ominously. "I can't swing it alone and you know it. That was the understanding. I need you to cover for me at Maria Beaumont's house next Wednesday. I'll need you for the cops afterward. I told you it was a ten week job. One day for the kill and sixty-nine days to cover."

"I'm sorry," T8 said. "I can't do it."

"You don't know how sorry you're going to be," Reich answered. He flipped the Warranty Seal and it clattered off the line. It was really an astonishing counterfeit; and the mere possession of it could make extraordinary difficulties if reported to the government. Reich pointed to the recording crystal. "Want to hear the playback?"

T8's face turned livid. "You contemptible fool! You recorded this conversation? You—"

"It'll stay recorded until we've finished the job. Then I'll send you the crystal and a hammer."

"If the police ever—it'll mean Demolition. Don't you realize that?"

"Demolition for both of us. Yes, I realize that." Reich's voice began to crack. "You little louse! Do you think I'm going to let anything stand between me and that bastard's blood? Anything?" He managed to take hold of himself. "You're in this all the way with me, and I'm in it straight to the finish . . . one way or the other. Don't forget the strain I'm under. I'm starting to defuse too."

REICH planned all that Monday, audaciously, bravely, with confidence. He planned as a story is plotted or a song is sketched. He penciled the outlines as an artist fills a sheet with delicate tracery before the bold inking-in; but he did no final inking. That was to be left for the killer-instinct on Wednesday night. He put the plan away and slept Monday night . . . and awoke screaming, dreaming of The Man With No Face.

But Tuesday morning he reexamined the plan and was satisfied. It was audacious, brave, confident. One trick to make himself invisible for the attack on D'Courtney; one time-machine to banish all defense out of the continuum; one ingenious deception to rob all peepers of their dangerous telepathic perception; one final, inexplicable murderous blow to destroy his enemy forever.

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Tuesday afternoon, Reich left Sacrament Tower early and dropped in at the Winter Studios on Sheridan Place. A two-century zigzag progression led from the old book store via: pornographic literature—pornographic Pantys—legitimate Pantys—industrial Pantys—industrial research—planetary research—and Planetary Conditioning to the giant block of buildings where would-be colonists were inducted and trained for survival in the strange new environments which they would encounter.

"I'm trying to survive too," Reich muttered. "But I'm already conditioned for it."

For sentimental reasons, the old Winter book store was still maintained in an alley between two of the colossal buildings. It also served as a space and light saver, and was a quaint landmark with its ancient Donaldson Resistance Hedge. It specialized mostly in piezo-electric recordings, tiny crystals mounted in elegant settings. The latest vogue was brouche-operas for M'lady. ("She Shall Have Music Wherever She Goes.") Winter also had shelves of fascinating old books.

"I want something special for a friend I've neglected," Reich told the salesman.

He was immediately bombarded with merchandise and suggestions.

"Not special enough," he complained. "Why don't you people hire a peeper and save your clients this trouble?" He began sauntering around the shop, tailed by a retinue of eager clerks. After he had dissembled sufficiently, and before the worried manager could send out for an emergency peeper salesman, Reich stopped before the bookshelves.

"What's this?" he inquired, looking surprised.

"Antique books, Mr. Reich." The sales staff began explaining what books were and how they used to be produced, while Reich slowly examined his way toward the tattered brown volume that was his goal. He remembered it well. He had glanced through it five years ago and made a note of one particular device in his little black opportunity book. Old Geoffrey Reich wasn't the only Reich who believed in preparedness.

"Interesting. What's this one?" Reich pulled down the brown volume. "*Let's Play Party* by Shirley Noyes. What's the date on it? You mean to say they had parties *that* long ago?"

The staff assured him that the ancients were very modern in many astonishing ways.

"Look at the contents," Reich chuckled. "'Honeymoon Bridge' . . . 'Prussian Whist' . . . 'Post

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Office' . . . 'Sardine'. What in the world could that be? Page ninety-six. Let's have a look."

Reich flipped pages until he came to a bold-face heading: HILARIOUS GAMES. "Look at this," he laughed, pointing to the well-remembered paragraph.

SARDINE

One player is selected to be It. All the lights are extinguished and the It hides anywhere in the house. After a few minutes, the players go to find the It, hunting separately. The first one who finds him does not reveal the fact, but hides with him wherever he is. Successively, each player finding the Sardines joins them until all are hidden in one place and the last player who is the loser is left to wander alone in the dark.

"I'll take it," Reich said. "This is just the thing for mu—for my friend."

THAT evening he spent three hours carefully defacing the remains of the volume. With heat, acid, stain and scissors, he mutilated the game instructions, and every burn, every cut, every slash was a blow at D'Courtney's writhing body. When his proxy murders were finished, he had reduced every game to incomplete fragments. Only 'Sardine' was left intact.

Reich wrapped the book, addressed it to ¢try, the appraiser, and dropped it into the airslot. It went off with a puff and a bang and returned an hour later with ¢try's official sealed appraisal. Reich's mutilations had not been suspected of being anything but the deterioration of ages.

He had the book gift-wrapped with the appraisal enclosed, as was the custom, and slotted it to Maria Beaumont's house. Twenty minutes later came the reply, obviously written by herself:

"Darling! I thot you'd forgotten litle ol sexy me. How 2 divine. Come to Beaumont House tonite. Were haveing a party. We'l play games from you're sweet gift." There was a portrait of Maria centered in the star of a synthetic ruby enclosed in the message capsule.

Reich answered: "Devastated. Not tonight. One of my millions is missing."

She answered: "Wenesday, you clever boy, I'll give you one of mine."

He replied: "Delighted to accept. Will bring guest. I kiss all of yours." He went to bed.

And screamed at The Man With No Face.

WEDNESDAY morning, Reich visited the laboratory department of Sacrament—"Paternalism, you know"—and spent a stimulating hour with the bright young men. He discussed their work and their glowing futures if they would only have faith in

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Sacrament. He told the old dirty joke about the neurotic pioneer who made the emergency landing on Joan Turnbul's starship—and the corpse said: "I'm just one of the tourists!" — and the bright young men laughed subservientl-ly, feeling slightly contemptuous of the boss.

This enabled Reich to drift into the Restricted Room unnoticed and pick up one of the Rhodopsin Ionizers, a cube of copper half the size of a fulminating cap, but twice as deadly as a time-machine. There would be a stink if the loss was noted in the weekly inventory, and one of the bright young men might have trouble with government inspectors and acquire a sentence; but by that time D'Courtney would be dead and rotting.

Wednesday afternoon, Reich went over to Melody Lane in the heart of the Panty district and called on Psych-Songs, Inc. There was a clever young woman there who had written some brilliant jingles for Sales and some effective strikebreaking songs for Propaganda back when Sacrament needed everything to smash that labor fracas in the Asteroid Belt. Duffy Wyg&, her name was, and she insisted that Duffy wasn't a nickname. Had been in the family for years.

"Well, Duffy?" He kissed her casually. She was pretty as a planet, but a trifle too young.

"Well, Mr. Reich? Still wearing that hideous tweed? No woman to guide you." She looked at him oddly. "Some day I'm going to hire one of those Lonely Heart Peepers to case your kiss. I keep thinking you don't mean business."

"I don't."

"You dog."

"A man has to make up his mind early, Duffy. If he kisses girls, he kisses his money goodby."

"You kiss me."

"Only because you're the image of the lady on the sovereign."

"Pip," she said.

"Pop," he said.

"Bim," she said.

"Bam," he said.

"I'd like to kill the gimp-head who invented that exchange," Duffy said revoltedly. "All right, handsome. What's your problem?"

"Gambling," Reich said. "Ellery West, my Rec director, is complaining about the gambling in Sacrament. Says there's too much. Personally, I don't care."

"Keep a man in debt and he's afraid to ask for a raise."

"You're entirely too smart, young lady."

"So you want a no-gamble-type song?"

"Something like that. Catchy.

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Not too obvious. More a delayed action than a straight propaganda tune. I'd like the conditioning to be more or less unconscious."

Duffy nodded and made quick notes.

"And *please* make it a tune worth hearing. I'll be listening to God knows how many people singing and whistling and humming it."

"You louse. All my tunes are worth hearing."

"Once."

"That's a thousand extra on my bill."

Reich laughed. "Speaking of monotony . . ."

"Which we weren't."

"What's the most persistent tune you ever wrote?"

"Persistent?"

"You know what I mean. Like those advertising jingles you can't get out of your head."

"Oh, Pepsis, we call 'em."

"Why?"

"They say because the first one was written centuries ago for the primitive radio and TV they had then by a character named Pepsi. Well, maybe. I don't know. I wrote one once . . ." Duffy winced in recollection. "Hate to think of it even now. It haunted me for a year."

"You're rocketing."

"Scout's honor, Mr. Reich. It was *Tenser, Said the Tensor.* I wrote it for that Panty about the crazy mathematician. They wanted nuisance value and they sure got it. People got so sore, they had to withdraw the Panty. Lost a fortune."

"Let's hear it."

"I couldn't do that to you."

"Come on, Duffy. I'm curious."

"You'll regret it."

"I don't believe you."

"All right, pig," she said, and pulled the multivox panel toward her. "This pays you back for the flabby kiss."

Her fingers and palms slipped gracefully over the panel. A tune filled the room with agonizing, unforgettable banality. It was the quintessence of every musical cliche Reich had ever heard. No matter what melody you tried to remember, it invariably led down the path of familiarity to *Tenser, Said the Tensor.* Then Duffy began to sing in an excruciating little voice:

> Eight, sir; seven, sir;
> Six, sir; five, sir;
> Four, sir; three, sir;
> Two, sir; one!
> Tenser, said the Tensor.
> Tenser, said the Tensor.
> Tension, apprehension
> And dissension have begun.

"Oh, my God!" Reich exclaimed.

"I've got some real clever-up tricks in that tune," Duffy said, still playing. "Notice the beat

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after 'one?' That's a semi-cadence. Then you get another beat after 'begun.' That turns the end of the song into a semi-cadence, too, so you can't ever end it. The beat keeps you running in circles, like: Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun. RIFF. Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun. RIFF. Tension, appre—"

"Duffy!" Reich protested.

"Another thing," she continued blandly. "There are thirteen syllables in the last two lines. You'd be surprised at the subconscious symbolic effect. Count them. Tension, apprehension and dissen—"

Reich started to his feet, pounding his palms on his ears. "How long is this affliction going to last?"

"Not less than a month."

"Tension, apprehension and diss—I'm ruined. Isn't there any way out?"

"Sure," Duffy said. "It's easy. Just ruin me." She pressed herself against him and planted an earnest young kiss. "Lout," she murmured. "Pig. Boob. Dolt. When are you going to drag me through the gutter? Clever up, dog. Why aren't you as smart as I think you are?"

"I'm smarter," he said, and left.

The song established itself firmly in his mind and echoed painfully all the way down to the street. *Tenser, said the Tensor. Tenser, said the Tensor. Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun. RIFF.* A perfect mind-block for a non-Esper to use. What peeper could get past that? *Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun.*

"Much smarter," muttered Reich, and took a Jumper to Jeremy Church's pawnshop on the upper west side.

Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun.

DESPITE all rival claims, pawnbroking is undoubtedly the oldest profession. It extends from the depths of the past to the uttermost reaches of the future, as unchanging as the pawnbroker's shop itself. You walked into Jeremy Church's cellar store, which was crammed and littered with the debris of time, and you were in a museum of eternity. And even Church himself, wizened, peering, his face blackened and bruised by the internal blows of suffering, was the very Ur-type or final evocation of humanity.

Church shuffled out of the shadows and came face to face with Reich, standing starkly illuminated in a patch of sunlight slanting across the counter. He did not start. He did not acknowledge Reich's identity. Brushing past the man who was his mortal

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enemy, he placed himself behind the counter and said: "Yes, please?"

"Hello, Jerry."

Without looking up, Church extended his hand across the counter. Reich attempted to clasp it. It was snatched away.

"No," Church said with a snarl that was a half hysterical laugh. "Not that, thank you. Just give me what you want to pawn."

It was the peeper's sour little trap, and he had tumbled into it. No matter.

"I haven't anything to pawn, Jerry."

"As poor as that? How the mighty have fallen. But we must expect it, eh? We all fall." Church glanced sidelong at him, trying to peep him. Let him try. *Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun.* Let him get through the crazy tune rattling in his head.

"All of us fall," Church said. "All of us."

"I expect so, Jerry. I haven't yet. I've been lucky."

"I wasn't lucky," the peeper said bitterly. "I met you."

"Jerry," Reich said patiently. "I've never been your bad luck. It was your own luck that ruined you. Not—"

"You bastard," Church said with a horrible lack of emphasis. "You cheating, lying, rotten cannibal. Get out of here. I want nothing to do with you."

"Not even my money?" Reich withdrew ten crisp ten sovereign notes from his pocket and placed them on the counter. *Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun . . .*

"I want your heart cut open. I want your blood spilling on the ground, I want the maggots eating the eyes out of your living head. I don't want your money."

"Then what do you want, Jerry?"

"I told you!" the peeper screamed. "Your freezing blood!"

"What do you want, Jerry?" Reich repeated, keeping his eyes on the wizened man. *Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun.* He could still control Church. It didn't matter that Church had been a 2nd, for control wasn't a question of peeping; it was a question of personality. *Eight, sir; seven, sir; six, sir; five, sir . . .* He always had and always would control Church.

"What do *you* want?" Church asked sullenly.

Reich snorted. "You're the peeper. You tell me."

"I can't read it. There's crazy music mixing everything up."

"Then I'll have to tell you. I want a gun."

"A what?"

"G-U-N. Gun. Ancient weapon. It propels projectiles by explosion."

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"I haven't anything like that."

"Yes, you do, Jerry. Keno Quizzard mentioned it to me some time ago. He saw it. Steel and collapsible. Very interesting antique."

"What do you want it for?"

"Read me, Jerry, and find out. I haven't anything to hide. It's all quite innocent."

Church screwed up his face, then quit in disgust. "You won't stick me with that nagging tune." He shuffled off into the shadows. There was a distant slamming of metal drawers, then the sharp crack of a split protective bulb. Church returned with a compact nodule of tarnished steel and placed it on the counter alongside the money. He pressed a stud and the lump of metal sprang open into steel knuckle-rings, revolver and stiletto.

"What do you want it for?" Church asked again.

"You're hoping it's something that can lead to blackmail, eh?" Reich smiled. "Sorry. It's a gift."

"A dangerous gift." The peeper gave him that sidelong glance of snarl and laugh. "Ruination for someone else, eh?"

"Not at all, Jerry. It's a gift for a friend of mine. Dr. T8."

"T8!" Church stared at him.

"Do you know him? He collects old things."

"I know him." Church began to chuckle asthmatically. "But I'm beginning to know him better. I'm beginning to feel sorry for him." He stopped laughing and shot a penetrating glance at Reich. "Of course! This will make a lovely gift for Gus. A fine gift for Gus. Because it's loaded."

"Oh? Is it?"

"Five lovely cartridges. A gift for Gus." He touched a cam. A cylinder snapped out of the side of the gun, displaying five chambers filled with brass cartridges. He looked from the cartridges to Reich. "Five serpent's teeth to give to Gus."

"I told you this was innocent," Reich said in a hard voice. "We'll have to pull those teeth."

Church stared at him in astonishment, then began to nod mischievously. "We will, we will," he chirped in a strangely delighted voice. He trotted down the aisle and returned with two small tools. "A gift for Gus," he chanted, almost hysterically. "A gift for nice little, rich little, happy little Gus." Quickly he wrenched each of the metal slugs from the cartridges. He slid the cases back into the chambers, snapped the cylinder home and then placed the gun alongside the money.

"All safe," he said brightly. "Safe for dear little Gus."

He looked at Reich expectantly. Reich extended both hands. With one he pushed the money

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toward Church, with the other he drew the gun toward himself. At that instant, Church changed again. The air of chirpy evil left him. He grasped Reich's wrists with iron claws and bent across the counter with blazing intensity.

"No, Ben," he said, using the name for the first time. "That isn't the price. You know it. Despite that crazy song in your head, I know you know it."

"All right, Jerry," Reich said steadily, never relaxing his hold on the gun. "What is the price?"

"It isn't money. You know that. There's been too much passed between us for money to pass again."

"What do you want, Jerry?"

"I know Gus is working for you."

"You didn't get that from me."

"I got it at Pres—never mind where I got it; I know. You're cooking something poisonous for Gus, aren't you? Something like you cooked for me."

"With a harmless gun? You removed the poison yourself, Jerry. Remember that."

"In case I'm asked?"

"Why should anyone ask?"

"I don't care what you do to Gus. I care about what you do for me."

"What do you want? What's the price?"

"I want to be reinstated," the ostracized peeper said. "I want to get back into the Guild. I want to be alive again. That's the price."

"What can I do? I'm not a peeper. I don't belong to the Guild."

"You got to me. You got to T8. You could get to the Guild. You could have me reinstated."

"Impossible."

"You can bribe, blackmail, intimidate . . . bless, dazzle, fascinate. You can do it, Ben. You can do it for me. Help me, Ben. I helped you once."

"I paid through the nose for that help."

"And I? What did I pay?" the peeper screamed. "I paid with my life!"

"You paid with your stupidity."

"For God's sake, Ben, help me! Help me or kill me. I just haven't the guts to commit suicide."

"I haven't got that price in my pocket, Jerry. Nobody has."

"All right. Listen." Church tightened his grasp on Reich's wrists and leaned farther forward. "Here's what you can do. Go to the police. Go to Preston Powell. Tell him what really happened in the Chaos Swindle. It'll be a confession, but you'll get off, Ben. A big man like you can always get off. And I'll be cleared. I can get back into the Guild. What do you say?"

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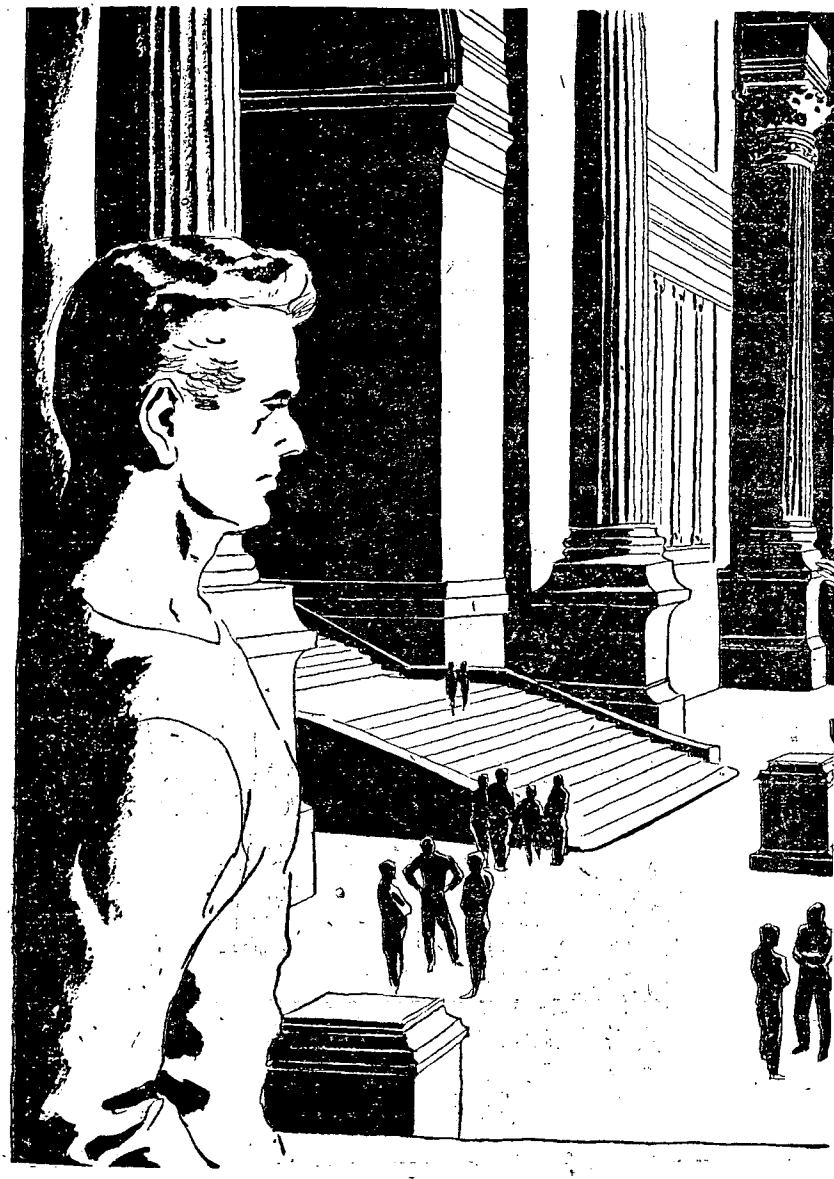

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After a pause, Reich said brutally: "I think the best thing for you, Jerry, would be suicide."

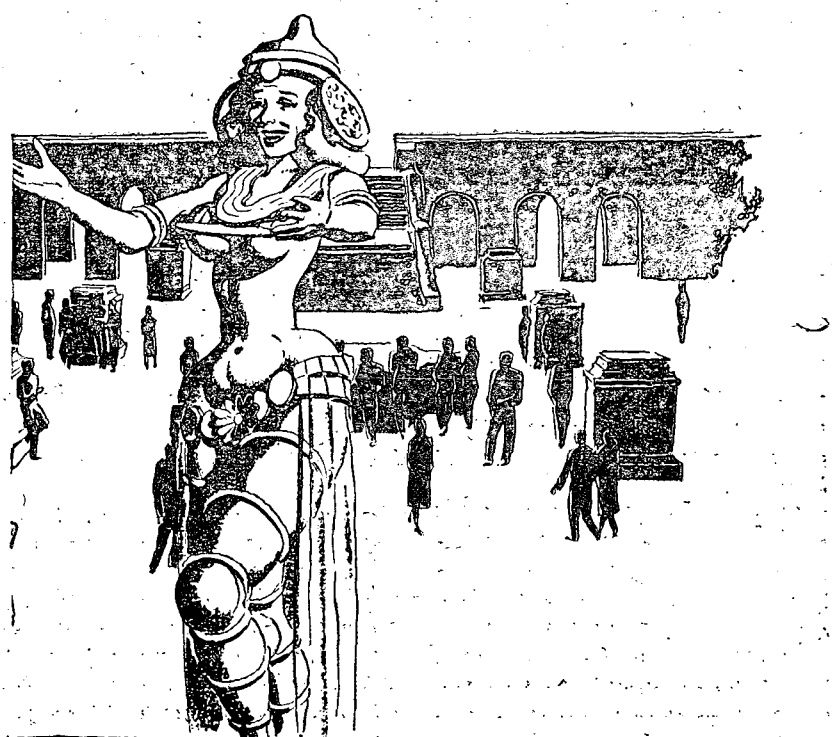
The peeper flung himself back as though he had suddenly been scorched.

"Now tell me the price," Reich said.

Deliberately, Church spat on the money. "There will be no charge," he said, and turned and disappeared into the shadows of the cellar.

V

UNTIL it was destroyed for reasons lost in the misty confusion of the late 20th Century, the Pennsylvania Station in New York City was, unknown to millions of travelers, a link in time. Commuters hurtling down the east escalators to the terminal floor rarely looked up at the towering interior columns and groined vaults. Those tourists



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who gaped and gasped rarely knew that all this had been before. They could not know that it would be again. The interior of the giant terminal was a replica of the mighty Baths of Caracalla in ancient Rome. So also was the sprawling mansion of Maria Beaumont, known to her thousand most intimate enemies as The Gilt Corpse.

As Ben Reich glided down the east ramp with Dr. T8 at his side and murder in his pocket, he communicated with his senses in stacatto spurts. The sight of the mob on the floor below . . . the glitter of uniforms, of dress, of phosphorescent flesh, of beams of pastel light swaying on stilt legs . . .

The sound of voices, of music, of annunciators, of echoes . . . The kinesthetic squeeze of his chest in a clash of hatred and terror . . . *Tension, apprehension and dissension* . . . The wonderful potpourri, the scent of flesh and perfume, of food, of wine, of gilt ostentation . . . *Tension, apprehension* . . .

The gilt trappings of death, of something which had failed for seventy years. A lost art . . . as lost as phlebotamy, chierurgy, alchemy . . . He'd bring death back. Not the hasty, crazy killing of the psychotic, the brawler, the killings they knew then, but the deliberate, planned —

"For God's sake!" T8 muttered. "Be careful, man. Your murder's showing."

Eight, sir; seven, sir . . .

"That's better. Here's one of the peeper secretaries. He just wants to rub elbows with the mighty, but keep singing."

A slender, willowy young man, all gush, all cropped golden hair, all violet blouse and silver culottes:

"Dr. T8! Mr. Reich! I'm speechless. Actually."

Six, sir; five, sir . . .

T8 shook hands with the secretary. *"Hello, Glass. Nice seeing you. Miss you at the Guild meetings."*

"I love you for saying it, but I hate you because you don't mean it." The peeper glanced at Reich curiously. *"Whatever is going on in Mr. Reich's mind?"*

"Some idiotic song plaguing him. Like those ad jingles."

"Or that old story of Mark Zain's about the poem that haunted him? You know—

Conductor, when you receive a fare,
Punch in the presence of the passenjare!
A blue trip slip for an eight-cent fare,
A buff trip slip for a six-cent fare,
A pink trip slip for a three-cent fare,
Punch in the presence of the passenjare!

Chorus

Punch, brothers! punch with care!
Punch in the presence of the passenjare!"

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"Exactly. Reich's got himself infected the same way."

"You mean the great man's actually human?"

"Superhuman." T8 darted a glance of respect mixed with malice at his dragooning employer.

Plunging into the pools of guests was like diving into a tropical aquarium. Swirls of glittering, brilliant human fish. Tables of gilt comestables like white and cold coral islands. Voices like bubbles, all tinkle and pop. The ceaseless ground-swell of the party heaving in quick tides around the celebrities.

Maria Beaumont clove through the waters, arms outstretched, eyes outstretched, bosom outstretched . . . her body transformed by pneumatic surgery into an exaggerated East Indian figure with puffed hips, puffed calves and puffed gilt breasts.

"Ben, darling creature!" She embraced him with pneumatic intensity. "It's too too wonderful."

"It's too too plastic, Maria."

"Have you found that lost million yet?"

"Just laid hands on it now."

"Be careful, audacious lover. I'm having every morsel of this divine party recorded."

Over her shoulder, Reich shot a glance at T8, hovering like an escort destroyer. T8 shook his head reassuringly.

"Come and meet everybody who's everybody," Maria said. She took his arm. In her pea-hen whisper, she shrilled: "We'll have ages for ourselves later."

The lights in the groined vaults overhead changed again and shifted up the spectrum. The costumes changed color. Skin that had glowed pink now shone with eerie luminescence.

Symon Zigerra . . . Jeanny Wonchalk . . . Tom Moyse, still hating him for that dirty trick at the Tycho Conference . . . Gloria Blomefield, Jr., still as sensual as that September weekend when he took the Blomefield formula from her by resisting her . . . Bill Winter, still pleading for justice with his silent, terrified eyes . . . Bart Van Tuerk . . . Edmund Barr, who had to be blackmailed out of that Sacrament expose . . . Toni Asj, still wearing that diamond he gave her when she submitted to degradation to buy back those shares of the Stellar Syndicate. She never got the shares, but she had the diamond. She attributed her degeneracy to him, he'd heard.

On his left flank, T8 gave the prearranged signal:

Danger!

Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun. RIFF. Tension, apprehension and dissention have begun . . .

Maria was introducing another

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lad, all gush, all cropped copper hair, all fuchsia blouse and Prussian blue culottes.

"Larry Ferar, Ben. My other social secretary. Larry's been dying to meet you."

Four, sir; three, sir . . .

"Mr. Reich! But too thrilled. I can't utter word one."

Two, sir; one!

The young man accepted Reich's smile and moved on. Still circling in convoy, T8 gave Reich a reassuring nod. Again the overhead lights changed. Portions of the guests' costumes appeared to dissolve. Reich, who had never succumbed to the fashion of wearing ultra-violet windows in his clothes, stood secure in his opaque suit, watching with contempt the quick, roving eyes around him.

T8 signaled: Danger!

Tenser, said the Tensor . . .

Glass appeared at Maria's elbow. "Madame," he lisped, "a slight contretemps."

"What is it?"

"The Chervil boy. Galen Chervil."

T8's face constricted.

"What about him?" Maria peeped through the crowd.

"Left of the fountain. An impostor, madame. I have peeped him. He has no invitation. He's a college student. He bet he could crash the party. He intends to steal a picture of you as proof."

"Of me?" Maria said, staring through the windows in young Chervil's clothes. "What does he think of me?"

"Well, madame, he's extremely difficult to probe. I think he'd like to steal more from you than your picture."

"Oh, would he?" Maria cackled.

"He would, madame. Shall he be removed?"

"No." Maria glanced once more at the formidable young man, then turned away. "He'll get his proof."

"And it won't be stolen," Reich said.

"Jealous!" she squawked. "Let's dine."

In response to T8's urgent sign, Reich stepped aside momentarily.

"Reich, you've got to give it up."

"You're crazy! Why should I?"

"The Chervil boy."

"What about him?"

"He's a 2nd."

"Damn!"

"He's precocious, brilliant. I met him at Powell's last Sunday. Maria Beaumont never invites peepers to her house. I'm only in on your pass. I was depending on that."

"And this kid has to crash!"

"Give it up, Reich."

"Maybe I can stay away from him."

"Reich, I can block the social

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secretaries; they're only 3rds. But I can't guarantee to handle them and a 2nd, even if he is only a kid. He's young and he may be too nervous to do any clever peeping. But I can't promise."

"I'm not quitting," Reich growled. "I'll never get a chance like this again. Even if I knew I could, I wouldn't quit. I couldn't. I've got the stink of D'Courtney in my nostrils. I—"

"Then we'd better have the Chervil boy bounced."

"Not a chance. You saw the way she looked him over."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go through with it, damn you!"

"You'll never—"

Reich turned his scowl full on T8's nervous face. "I know you're looking for a chance to squirm out of this, you little bastard. But you won't. We're trapped in this together, right down the line, all the way to Demolition."

He shaped his distorted face into a frozen smile and rejoined his hostess on a couch alongside one of the tables. It was still the custom to feed each other at these affairs, but the gesture that had originated in Oriental courtesy and generosity had degenerated into erotic play. The morsels of food were accompanied by tongue touched to fingers and were as often offered between the lips.

Reich endured it all with a seething impatience, waiting for the vital word from T8. Part of T8's Intelligence work was to locate D'Courtney's hiding place in the house. He watched the little peeper drift through the crowd of diners, probing, prying, searching, until he at last returned with a negative shake of his head and gestured toward Maria Beaumont. Clearly, Maria was the only source of information, and she was too obsessed to be easily probed. It was another in a never-ending series of crises that had to be met by the killer-instinct.

Between the Truite Au Bleu and the Saucisses Au Vin Blanc, Reich arose and crossed toward the fountain. T8 intercepted him.

"What are you up to, Reich?"

"Isn't it obvious? Get the Chervil boy off her mind."

"Reich, don't go near that boy!"

"Get out of my way." Reich radiated a burst of savage compulsion that made the peeper recoil. He signaled in fright and Reich tried to control himself.

"It's taking chances, I know, but the odds aren't as long as you think. In the first place, he's young and green. In the second place, he's a crasher and scared. In the third place, he can't be flying full jets or he wouldn't have let the secretaries peep him so easily."

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"Have you got any conscious control? Can you double-think?"

"I've got that song on my mind and enough trouble to make double-thinking a pleasure. Now get the hell out of the way and stand by to peep Madame, The Gilt Corpse."

CHERVIL was eating alone alongside the fountain, clumsily attempting to appear to belong.

"Pip," said Reich.

"Pop," said Chervil.

"Bim," said Reich.

"Bam," said Chervil.

With the formality of slang disposed of, Reich eased himself down alongside the boy. "I'm Ben Reich."

"I'm Gally Chervil. I mean Galen. I—" He was visibly impressed by the name of Reich.

Tension, apprehension and dissension . . .

"That damned song," Reich muttered. "Heard it for the first time the other day. Can't get it out of my mind. Eight, sir; seven, sir; six, sir; five—Oh, for God's sake! Talk to me, Chervil, before I go crazy."

"What should I talk about?"

"Ever been in The Gilt Corpse before?"

"Do you mean the house?"

"Pop," grinned Reich.

"Pip," smiled the boy.

"She knows you're a phony."

"No!"

Reich nodded. *Tension, apprehension . . .*

"Should I start running?"

"Without the picture?"

"You know about that too? There must be a peeper around."

"Two of them. Her social secretaries. People like you are their job."

"What about that picture, Mr. Reich? I've got fifty dollars riding on it. You ought to know what a bet means. You're a gamb—I mean, financier."

"Glad I'm not a peeper, eh? Never mind, I'm not insulted. See that arch? Go straight through and turn right. You'll find a study. The walls are lined with Maria's portraits, all in synthetic stones. Help yourself. She'll never miss one."

The boy leaped up, scattering food off his lap. "Thanks, Mr. Reich. Some day I'll do you a favor."

"Such as?"

"You'd be surprised. I happen to be a—" He caught himself and blushed. "You'll find out, sir. Thanks again." He began weaving his way across the floor toward the north arch.

Four, sir; three, sir; two, sir; one!

Reich returned to his hostess.

"Naughty lover," she said. "Who've you been feeding? I'll tear her eyes out."

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"The Chervil boy," Reich answered. "He asked me where you keep your pictures."

"Ben! You didn't tell him!"

"Sure did. He's on his way to get one now. Then he'll take off. You know I'm jealous."

She leaped from the couch and waddled north.

"Bam," said Reich.

BY eleven o'clock, the ritual of dining had aroused the company to a point of intensity that required solitude and darkness. Maria Beaumont had never failed her guests, and tonight Reich hoped The Gilt Corpse would not fail him when T8 appeared, looking pleased and yet worried.

"I don't know how you got away with it," T8 whispered. "You're broadcasting bloodlust on every wavelength."

"The kid doesn't know?"

"Not a notion. You were right. He's scared . . . off balance."

"And I know who knocked him off balance. Where's D'Courtney?" Reich grabbed T8's arm. "Don't tell me he isn't in the house, you little roach. I can smell him waiting for me."

"Reich!" T8 tore his arm away. "Yes, he's here. Alone. No servants. Only two bodyguards provided by Maria. @kins was right. He's dangerously sick . . ."

"To hell with that. I'll cure him. Where is he?"

"Go through the west arch. Turn right. Up the stairs. Through overpass. Turn right. Picture Gallery. Door between paintings of the Rape of Lucrece and the Rape of the Sabine Women . . ."

"That sounds authentic."

"Open the door. Up a flight of steps to an anteroom. Two guards in the anteroom. D'Courtney's inside. It's the old wedding suite her grandfather built."

"The wedding suite? I like that touch."

The Gilt Corpse began to clamor for attention. Flushed and shining with perspiration, standing in the glare of a pink light on the dais between the two fountains, she clapped her hands for silence: Smack, smack, smack. The moist palms beat together, and the echoes roared in Reich's ears: Death, death, death.

"Darlings!" she cried. "We're going to have so much fun tonight. We're going to provide our own entertainment." A subdued groan went up from the guests and an anonymous voice called: "I'm just one of the tourists."

Through the laughter, Maria said: "Naughty lovers, don't be disappointed. We're going to play a wonderful old game; and we're going to play it in the dark."

The company cheered up as the overhead lights began to dim and disappear. The dais still

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blazed and, in the light, Maria produced a tattered volume. Reich's gift.

Tension . . .

Maria turned the pages slowly, blinking at the unfamiliar print.

Apprehension . . .

"It's a game," Maria cried, "called Sardine. Isn't that too adorable?"

She took the bait. She's on the hook. In three minutes I'll be invisible. Reich touched his pockets. The disarmed gun. The Rhodopsin. *Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun.*

"One player," Maria read, "is selected to be It. That's going to be me. All the lights are ex—extinguished and the It hides."

As Maria struggled through the directions, the great hall was reduced to pitch darkness with the exception of the single pink beam on the stage.

"Suc—successively, each player finding the Sardines joins them until all are hidden in one place, and the last player, who is the loser, is left to wander alone in the dark." The last light blinked out. Reich was invisible at last. He had half an hour to slip up into the house, kill D'Courtney, and then return to the game. T8 was committed to pinning the peeper secretaries out of the line of his attack. It was safe. It was fool-proof except for the Chervil boy. He had to take that chance.

HE crossed the main hall and jostled into mewing bodies at the west arch. He went through the arch into the music room. The piezo crystals were resonating automatically in the background, but there were muffled dischords from an open piano as though the strings were being used for a wrestling mat. Savage and intent, Reich ignored this and turned right, groping for the stairs. A curse and a clash sounded from the piano, then shod feet ran across the floor and somebody soft banged into him.

"If you touch me," the voice of Duffy Wyg& cried hysterically, "I'll kill you."

Reich froze. "Duffy!" he exclaimed, and then could have torn his tongue out.

"Who's that? Mr. Reich?"

"Yes."

Her hand touched his arm and felt the cloth. "Bless you, Mr. Reich." She leaned against him weakly. "God bless that hideous tweed."

"What's the matter, Duffy? Don't you like the gutter?"

"I don't like the company."

"Then go back to Melody Lane."

She held tight to his arm. "This is my first and last visit. How do I get out of this sty?"

"Back through the main hall and up the ramp."

"I don't know which way is

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which. Get me out of here, Mr. Reich. I need a bodyguard."

In an agony of impatient fury, he searched for excuses. A retching voice behind him said: "Can I d-do you a favor, Mr. Reich?"

"Who's that?"

"A refugee. Galen Chervil. Slightly sick."

Eight, sir; seven, sir; six, sir; five, sir . . .

The Chervil boy loomed in the darkness alongside. "I had to run hard to get away from that . . . picture. I'm still running, between spasms. I never was happier to lose fifty dollars."

Four, sir; three, sir; two, sir; one!

"I'm running too," Duffy said.

"Just babes in the woods," Chervil said. "High-life. Pfoo! Let's run together."

"Do you know the way out in the dark?"

Tenser, said the Tensor. Tenser, said the Tensor.

"I can find it. Give me your hand, Duffy."

"How do you know my name?"

"Oop. Slip of the mind. Not myself tonight. Coming with us, Mr. Reich?"

Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun.

"No," Reich choked. "Wish I could. Impossible. You two kids get out of here. Jet!"

They scuttled off in the dark.

RIFF!

At the foot of the stairs he was forced to climb over a barrier of bodies with octopus arms that tried to pull him down. He ascended the stairs, seventeen eternal steps, and felt his way through a close tunnel overpass papered with velour. Suddenly he was seized and a woman crushed herself against him.

"Hello, Sardine," she whispered in his ear. "Ow!" she exclaimed, feeling the hard outlines of the gun in his breast pocket. "What's that?" He slapped her hand away. "Clever up, Sardine," she giggled. "Get out of the can."

He divested himself of her and bruised his nose against the dead-end of the overpass. He turned right, opened a door and found himself in a vaulted gallery over fifty feet long. The lights were extinguished here, too, but the luminiscent paintings, glowing under ultraviolet spotlights, filled the gallery with a virulent glow. It was empty.

Between a livid Lucrece and a horde of buttocky Sabine Women was a door of polished bronze. Reich stopped before it, removed the tiny Rhodopsin Ionizer from his back pocket and attempted to poise the copper tube between his thumbnail and forefinger. His hands were trembling so violently that he could not control them.

His fingers steadied. He poised the Rhodopsin cap, then thrust

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open the bronze door, revealing nine steps mounting to an anteroom. Reich flipped his thumbnail against the copper cube as though he were trying to flip a penny to the Moon.

As the Rhodopsin cap flew up into the anteroom, Reich averted his eyes. There was a cold purple flash. Reich leaped up the stairs.

The two Beaumont House guards were seated on the bench where he had caught them. Their faces were sagging, their visual sense destroyed, their time sense abolished, their synapses clattering in short-circuited chaos. They were out of the continuum.

If anyone entered and found the guards before he was finished, he was on the road to Demolition. If the guards revived before he was finished, he was on the road to Demolition. No matter what happened, it was a final gamble with Demolition.

Leaving the last of his sanity behind him, Reich pushed open a jeweled door and entered the wedding suite.

VI

REICH found himself in a spherical room that was the heart of a giant orchid. The walls were curling orchid petals, the pillars were stamens, the floor was a golden calyx; the chairs, tables and couches were orchid and gold. But the room was old . . . old . . . the petals faded and peeling, the golden tile floor ancient and the tessellations splitting. There was an old, old man stretched on the couch, musty and wilted, like a dried weed . . . like the dessication of a venomous mandrake root.

It was D'Courtney, stretched out like a corpse.

Reich slammed the door in rage. "You can't be dead! I can't be cheated!"

The faded man started up, stared, then arose painfully from the couch, his face breaking into a smile.

"Still alive!" Reich cried exultantly.

D'Courtney stepped toward Reich, smiling, his arms outstretched, as though welcoming a prodigal son. The smile was almost imbecile.

Alarmed again, Reich growled: "Are you deaf?"

The old man shook his head.

"You speak English, you son of a bitch," Reich shouted. "You can hear me. You can understand me. I'm Reich. Ben Reich of Sacrament."

D'Courtney nodded, still smiling. His mouth worked soundlessly. His eyes glistened with sudden tears.

"What the hell is the matter with you? I'm Reich. Ben Reich! Do you know me? Answer me."

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D'Courtney shook his head and tapped his throat. His mouth worked again. Rusty sounds came; then words as faint as dust: "Ben . . . dear Ben . . . waited so long. Now . . . can't talk. My throat . . . can't talk." Again he attempted to embrace Reich.

Bristling, Reich stepped around D'Courtney like an animal, his hackles raised, the murder boiling in his blood, the horrible images of D'Courtney's agony rushing through his congested eyes. His breath came in gasps. His heart pounded. He poised himself before D'Courtney and glared into the old man's face.

D'Courtney's mouth formed the words: "Dear Ben . . ."

"You know why I'm here. What are you trying to do—make love to me?" His hand lashed out. The old man reeled back from the slap and fell into an orchid chair that looked like a wound.

"Listen to me, you old son of a bitch." Reich followed D'Courtney and stood over him. "This payoff's been on the fire for years. Fire? Volcano! And you want to turn aside the magma with a Judas kiss!"

"Ben," D'Courtney whispered in horror. "Listen, Ben . . ."

"You've been at my throat for ten years. Ten years! There was room enough for both of us. Sacrament and D'Courtney. All the room in time and space, but you wanted my blood, my heart. The Man With No Face!"

D'Courtney shook his head in bewilderment. "No, Ben. No . . ."

"Don't call me Ben. I'm no friend of yours. Last week I gave you one more chance to wash in decency. Me. Ben Reich. I asked for armistice. Merger. My father would spit on me if he were alive. Every fighting Reich would blacken my face with contempt. But I asked for peace, didn't I? Eh?" Reich prodded D'Courtney savagely. "Didn't I?"

O'Courtney's face was blanched and staring. Finally he whispered: "Yes. You asked . . . I accepted."

"Accepted!" Reich cut in sharply. "Are these the tactics that win for you? It isn't possible, is it? The phony affection. Dear Ben. The warmth from a frozen heart. Empty stupid lies. What imbecile could swallow them?"

Reich reached down and yanked D'Courtney to his feet. The old man was frail and light, but his weight bruised Reich's arm, and the touch of the old skin burned Reich's fingers.

"No merger. No peace. Death. That's the choice, eh?"

D'Courtney shook his head and tried to make signs.

"Will you surrender?"

"Yes," D'Courtney whispered. "Yes, Ben. Yes."

"Liar! Protective mimicry.

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That's your trick. You imitate the idiots and trap us at your leisure. But not me. Never!"

"I'm not . . . your enemy, Ben."

"No," Reich spat. "You're not because you're dead. You've been dead ever since I came into this orchid coffin. Man With No Face! Can you hear me screaming for the last time? You're finished!"

Reich tore the gun out of his breast pocket. He touched the stud and it opened like a red steel flower. D'Courtney backed away in horror. Reich caught the back of D'Courtney's thin neck and wrenched the head toward him. He had to fire through the open mouth for the trick to work.

At that instant, one of the orchid petals swung open, and a girl burst into the room. In a catastrophic blaze of surprise, Reich saw the corridor behind her, a bedroom door standing open at the far end; the girl, yellow hair flying, dark eyes wide in alarm . . . a lightning flash of wild beauty.

"Father!" she screamed.

She ran toward D'Courtney. Reich swung quickly between them, never relaxing his hold on the old man. The girl stopped short, backed away, then darted to the left around Reich, screaming. Reich pivoted and cut viciously at her with the stiletto. She eluded him, but was driven back of the couch. Reich thrust the point of the stiletto between the old man's teeth and forced his jaws open.

"No!" she cried. "No! Father!"

Reich pulled the trigger. There was a muffled explosion and a gout of blood spurted from the back of D'Courtney's head. Reich let the body drop.

The girl fell forward to her knees and crawled to the body. She moaned in pain as she snatched the gun from the mouth, where it had still hung. Then she crouched over the twitching body, silent, fixed, staring into the waxen face.

Reich gasped for breath and beat his knuckles together painfully. When the roaring in his ears subsided, he propelled himself toward the girl, trying to arrange his thoughts and make split-second alterations in his plans. He had never counted on a witness. No one mentioned a daughter. God damn T8! Now he would have to kill the girl. He—

She leaped to her feet, darted out of his sodden grasp, ran to the jeweled door, flung it open and ran into the anteroom. As the door slowly closed, Reich had a glimpse of the guards still slumped on the bench and the girl running silently down the stairs with the gun in her hands . . . with Demolition in her hands.

The clogged blood began

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pounding through his veins again. He reached the door, ran through and tore down the steps to the picture gallery. It was empty, but the door to the overpass was just closing. And still no sound from her. Still no alarm. How long before she started screaming the house down?

He raced down the gallery and entered the overpass. It was still pitch dark. He blundered through, reached the head of the stairs that led down to the music room and paused again. He went down the steps. The dark silence was terrifying. Why didn't she scream? Where was she?

Reich crossed toward the west arch and knew he was at the edge of the main hall by the quiet plash of the fountains. Where was the girl? In all that black silence, where was she? And the gun! Christ! The tricked gun!

A hand touched his arm. Reich jerked in alarm. T8 whispered: "I've been standing by. It took you exactly—"

"You clumsy peeper!" Reich burst out. "There was a daughter! Why didn't you—"

T8 muttered, "Let me peep it." After fifteen seconds of burning silence, he began to tremble. In a terrified voice he whined: "My God! Oh, my God . . ."

His terror was the catalyst. Reich's control returned. He began thinking again. "Shut up," he growled. "It isn't Demolition yet."

"You'll have to kill her too, Reich. You'll—"

"Find her first. Cover the house. You got her pattern from me. Locate her. I'll be waiting at the fountain. Jet!"

He flung T8 from him and staggered to the fountain. At the jasper rim, he bent and bathed his burning face in the water. It was sparkling burgundy. Reich wiped his face and ignored the muffled sounds that came from the other side of the basin. Evidently some persons were bathing in wine.

He considered swiftly. The girl must be located and killed. At once. If she still had the gun when T8 found her, the gun would be used. If she didn't? Strangle her? No, the fountain. She could be found drowned in the fountain . . . just another guest who had bathed in wine too long. But it had to be soon, before this damned Sardine game was ended. Where was T8? Where was the girl?

T8 came blundering up through the darkness, wheezing.

"Well?"

"She's gone."

"You weren't gone long enough to find out. If this is a double-cross—"

"Whom could I cross? I'm on the same road you are. I tell you

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her pattern's nowhere in the house. She's gone."

"Anyone notice her leave?"

"No."

"Out of the house!"

"We'd better leave, too."

"Yes, but we can't run. Once we get out of here, we'll have the rest of the night to find her, but we can't sneak out. Too suspicious. Where's Maria?"

"For God's sake, Reich . . ."

"I tell you we've got to leave as though nothing's happened. Where's The Gilt Corpse?"

"In the projection room."

"Watching a Panty?"

"No. Still playing Sardine. They're packed in there like fish in a can. We're almost the last out here in the house."

"Wandering alone in the dark, eh? Come on."

He gripped T8's shaking elbow and marched him toward the projection room. As he walked, he called plaintively: "Hey, where is everybody? Maria!"

T8 emitted a hysterical sob. Reich shook him roughly. "Play up! We'll be out of here in five minutes. Then you can start worrying."

"If they find the body before we leave, we're sunk."

"Who'll find the body?"

"The guards."

"Not in five minutes. They're out of this world. Well out."

"Servants."

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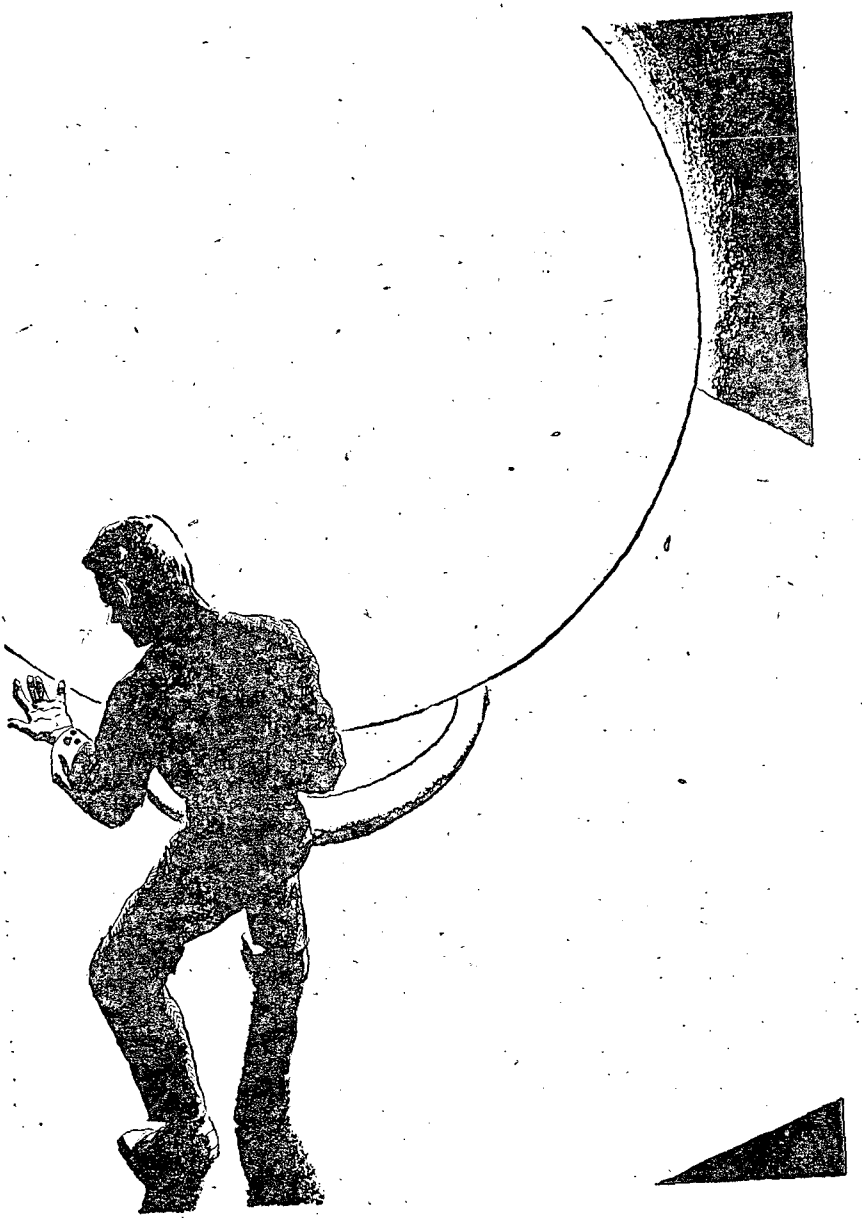

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"They won't leave their quarters till the Sardine game is over. I tell you we'll be safe in five minutes."

"But if we're trapped in here, we won't be able to get the girl. We'll—"

"We won't be trapped. ABC, Gus—audacious, brave and confident." Reich pushed open the door of the projection room. There was darkness in here, too, but the heat of many bodies. "Hey," he called. "Where is everybody? I'm all alone."

No answer.

"Maria, I'm all alone in the dark."

A muffled sputter, then a burst of laughter.

"Darling!" Maria called. "You've missed all the fun, poor dear."

"Where are you, Maria? I've come to say good night."

"Oh, you can't be leaving."

"Sorry, dear. It's late. I've got to swindle a friend tomorrow. Where are you, Maria?"

"Come up on the stage, darling."

Reich walked down the aisle, felt for the steps and mounted the stage. He felt the cool perimeter of the Pantys globe behind him. A voice called: "All right. Now we've got him. Lights!"

White light flooded the globe and blinded Reich. The guests seated in the chairs around the stage started to whoop with laughter, then howled in disappointment.

"Oh Ben, you cheat," Maria screeched. "You're still dressed. That isn't fair. We've been catching everybody divinely *flagrante*."

"Some other time, Maria dear." Reich extended his hand before him and began the graceful bow of farewell. "Respectfully, madame, I give you my thanks for—" He broke off in amazement. On the gleaming white lace of his cuff, an angry red spot appeared.

In stunned silence, Reich saw a second, then a third red splotch appear. He snatched his hand back and a red drop spattered on the stage before him, to be followed by a slow, inexorable stream of crimson droplets.

"That's blood!" Maria screamed. "There's someone upstairs bleeding. Ben, for heaven's sake, you can't leave now. Lights! Lights!"

Blood — dripping through the ceiling—D'Courtney's blood. Not enough to fill a teaspoon yet, but Reich felt he was drowning in it.

Tension, apprehension and dissension have begun . . .

—ALFRED BESTER

Continued Next Month

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dead end

By WALLACE MACFARLANE

Sparing people's feelings is deadly.

It leads to—no feelings, no people!

Illustrated by DAVID STONE

SCIENTIST William Manning Norcross drank his soup meticulously and scooped up the vegetables at the bottom of the cup, while his attention was focused on the television screen. He watched girls swimming in formation as he gnawed the bone of his steak. He stolidly ate the baked potato with his fingers when the girls turned around, displaying "Weejees Are Best" signs pasted to their shapely backs. The final flourish was more formation swimming, where they formed a wheel under water, swimming past the camera to display in individual letters stuck to their bare midriffs: "Wonderful Weejees!"

Norcross chuckled appreciatively when a fat old man swam after them with an "Is That Right?" strung across his behind. Young men followed him, each carrying a one-word card that spelled: "You—Bet—It's—Right — Don't — Be — Left — Buy —Weejees—!" The scene ended on the surface. The grotesque old man was far in back, while the young men caught the young women, and together they kicked up a cloud of spray in the dis-

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tance, which by a trick of photography mounted to the sky and the words swept around the globe in monstrous letters: "BUY WEEJEES!"

The dessert was apple pie, and Scientist Norcross turned the screen to the "Abstractions" channel. Watching the colors and patterns form in response to the music, he finished the pie and licked his fingers appreciatively. He pressed a stud to reveal the mirror wall before he activated the molecular cleanup.

Not many people would do that. It was not contrary to morals, exactly, but it was like scratching in public, and it took a scientific mind to study the human form unshaken, immediately after ingestion. There was pie on his tunic and gravy in his hair and a smear of grease from cheek to ear. With no sign of squeamishness, he smeared beet juice on his nose and studied the effect before he depressed the "Clear" stud.

He stretched and stood up while the tray disappeared, then turned and glanced in the mirror again. Nothing on him. Clean. He yawned luxuriantly before he tapped the "Finish" panel on the door and stepped forth, an immaculate and well-fed gentlemen of the year 2512.

He had a well-trained sense of humor, and a smile crossed his lips as he thought of the terror a 21st Century man would feel in such an eating chamber. When he pressed the clear button, the barbarian would be clean—really, sterilely clean—for the first time in his life, and without clothes, too. Oh, what a jape that would be, for the molecular cleanup would immediately disintegrate such abominations as the fur of animals, and much clothing 400 years ago was actually made of such things as sheep hair.

He bowed to a pretty woman just entering a cubicle, and thought defiantly that a scientific mind afforded much amusement. There was no illusion in his icy clear thoughts, for they were not befogged by moral questions.

With a sigh, Scientist William Manning Norcross returned to the difficult problem he had set aside while having lunch. The garden city was beautiful outside, but he gave only passing attention to the rain slithering down the huge dome of force over the buildings. He did not pause to admire the everlasting flowers in their carefully simulated beds of soil.

John Davis Drumstetter was in a state of crisis again, and Scientist Norcross was worried.

His fears were well founded. The young man wheeled on Scientist Norcross the minute he stepped through the hedge into

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the force field under the giant live oak tree.

"Where are they?" he demanded. "I am coming to believe, Scientist, that your reputation is exceeded only by your inability to live up to it. The problem is only an extension of your own early work. You volunteered cooperation, and I accepted it gladly, but your delays are very distressing!"

"Johnny," said Scientist Norcross, "the press of my own experiments—"

"Then tell me you won't do it!"

"I want to help you. Don't you remember the years we spent together in your training to the high calling of scientist? I took your young hand, Johnny, and helped you over the juvenile stumbling blocks. Why, your first mind machine was one I gave you, and when—"

"You're a fraud, Scientist!" said the young man bitterly.

"The young never appreciate the old," sighed Norcross.

"Go suck a mango!"

Norcross was shocked. "There's no call for being obscene, John Davis Drumstetter," he said sternly. "To mention eating to another person, and right in public, where you might be overheard—"

"Eat a slippery, sloppery mango on *television,* you old fool! Smear it all over your face while you ingest it into your unspeakable digestive tract!"

"John Davis Drumstetter," said the scientist with great control, "I have been your friend since you were born. Your father and I became scientists on the same day. You are young and overeager. Just remember," he finished with a warning shake of his finger, "Satellite Station One wasn't built in a day!"

Drumstetter stopped his furious pacing and subdued his rage with visible effort. He chilled, like red steel hardening, and when he spoke he was in full command of himself.

"Now listen to me, Norcross, and keep your mouth shut. For the past forty years I've been working on the stellar overdrive. We have the Solar System in our reticule, colonies have been established on every planet, and ships have been sent to Alpha Centauri, with every chance that mankind has established itself in that solar system. But in the four hundred years since science emerged from the dark ages, we've managed to creep only four light years away from home! And you, Scientist, are withholding your work on the overdrive relay. Do you understand why your plea of old friendship does not affect me? In the past two years, you've done nothing—"

"Experiments that must be

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kept secret," mumbled Norcross.

"And it is my belief," said the young man in a clipped, cold voice, "that you have sold yourself to your taste buds and digestive tract. Either that," and here his burning rage came into the open, "or you are a pseudo-life!"

At this ultimate insult, Scientist Norcross was silent with indignation. He watched Drumstetter shrug into a stole, turn down the power to the huge mind machine, sling his reticule over his shoulder, and stalk off through the hedge.

NORCROSS slumped into a chair, his mind in confusion. He heard Drumstetter's plane as it left the ground. Plane, he thought, his mind avoiding the problem. Plane. What a curious name, handed down through the ages, to call a swift skip powered by Earth's magnetism. An original plane fought the air, buoyed up by the lift of plane surfaces in movement. When the movement stopped, it died.

Died. Death. Pseudo-life.

Scientist Norcross shuddered. His well-trained sense of humor did not include abominations.

He took the communication from his pocket and cleared to Prime Center. When the prim, grim face of Prime Center himself in the little disc was sharp, Norcross reported what had happened, even to the suggestion Drumstetter had made that he was pseudo-life.

"This is very bad," said Prime Center. "Monica Drake Lane is now pseudo-life, too."

"God's name!"

"Took her skip into a cliff in the Sierra [illegible]ountains yesterday. Disconnected the anti-collision. A clear case."

"What will this do to Drumstetter?"

"Nothing," said Prime Center, "unless he learns."

"Is she ready?"

"I'm sending her to you right now for indoctrination. Reports are that Drumstetter is visiting scientists on the West Coast, and Probability reports that he may cover the world before he returns. Do you understand? Her indoctrination must be perfect."

"It always has been." Norcross pulled his lip. "The same limitation will be in Monica Drake Lane?" he asked hopelessly.

"Of course," said Prime Center. "We'll keep you posted on developments."

"You'd better try women," said Norcross.

"Women, narcotics, or anything else! I'd eat a blueberry pie with my hands behind my back at high noon," said Prime Center with fierce obscenity, "if I thought it would do any good!"

He cut the connection.

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Norcross was still under the oak tree, lost in contemplation of a color abstraction on his little communication, when a tall blonde girl, brown as a berry, stepped hesitantly through the hedge. She walked to him and, when he looked up, she buried her face in her hands. He stood and held her shoulders.

"Now, now," said Scientist Norcross, "don't cry, my dear."

"But this is so puzzling—and I wasn't crying," she answered. "What's happened to me?"

"Sit down, Monica, and tell me what you think has happened."

"But I don't know. You see, the last I remember is walking through the Psych Lab in San Francisco, and suddenly — suddenly, I'm in New York and they're sending me to you. What has happened?"

"Where do you first remember being in New York?"

"In the—oh, I don't know!" She was in a flush of embarrassment.

"I'll help you, my dear. You were in the pseudo-life clinic. You are not *exactly* Monica Drake Lane any longer. She died. You are pseudo-life."

Her eyes were bright and the pupils were pinpointed from shock.

"You are the pseudo-life Monica Drake Lane. To all outward appearances, you are an exact counterpart of the girl. Inwardly? Well, your internal organs have been simplified, and you cannot reproduce. Aside from such minor changes, you are identical, and incidentally a much more efficient creature than your prototype. And if your mind, which is a very good one, was a human mind, I could not tell you this. Pseudo-life is a most remarkable thing, but Lewis and Havinghurst and Covalt, who developed it 300 years ago, were never able to imbue pseudo-life with what they called the minus-one factor, which includes the phenomenal human emotional sensitivity, among other things. Are you feeling better now?"

"Why, yes—" Her voice trailed off.

"You are no longer a slave of your emotions," said Scientist Norcross complacently. "None of us are."

"You—you are—?"

"Oh, yes. We generally don't speak of such things, but since I'm to introduce you to pseudo-life, I can tell you that I died two years ago."

"I'm afraid I never d[illegible]ow —or Monica Drake Lane [illegible] — that is, I—"

"You *are* Monica Drake Lane. If you will sit quietly, I'll tell you about it." Scientist Norcross took two cigarettes from his reticule and offered the girl one. The

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lip play was considered somewhat daring between the sexes, but under the circumstances he thought the mild narcotic would be good for her, as well as the sharpening of the senses brought on by actually smoking together.

"When the Americans, who inhabited this continent, gained domination of the world in the 21st Century, they consolidated their position by carrying their customs to the ends of the Earth. For that matter, to Alpha Centauri, if the ships did get through.

"Forgive me," he interrupted himself, "if I seem improper or even immoral in this little talk of ours. Believe me, it's not with an easy disregard of proprieties that I bring myself to speak of such things.

"Well, the Americans believed, and rightly so, that death is a dreadful thing. Until Lewis and Havinghurst and Covalt developed pseudo-life, a great deal of time and effort and money went into such things as cemeteries—places where they literally buried their dead with elaborate ceremonials and much anguish. They had other equally wasteful practices, such as madhouses and jails, which were done away with when it became practical to replace a useless person with another, who matched the original to near absolute perfection, but without fatal flaws of body or weaknesses of the mind.

"Emphasis has shifted since those early years, when the abnormals were dealt with, to the comforting of human beings. Should John Davis Drumstetter suffer greatly at the loss of his mentor, the man who guided him in the ways of science? Of course not. He never knew I died."

Norcross puffed complacently, sending iridescent rainbow smoke rings over the mind machine.

"And I am his fiancee," said the girl.

"Should he suffer because you died? No reason for it," said Norcross heartily. "A psychic trauma of that nature would make him desperately unhappy. Happiness is the proper state in life, as everyone knows. In fact, you will make him much happier than Monica Drake Lane, the original, ever could."

"Yes, I shall be happy," mused the girl, as if feeling a more limited capacity for sorrow within herself. "But you spoke of a minus-one factor."

"Yes, it takes in a lot of things. Though we are immortal, barring accidents, and we retain all the knowledge we had as human beings, the flaw to pseudo-life is that no original thought is possible. Students of the matter compare it to glancing at a page in a dictionary. Of course you don't consciously remember the words

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there, but in pseudo-life you are capable of remembering and using them properly, so to speak, but not using them creatively. That is our trouble with John Davis Drumstetter. I was a brilliant physicist, but the understanding of new problems is beyond my limitations, and he is beyond me."

"But I woke in New York," she said irrelevantly.

"Because your master pseudo-life file was kept there," explained Scientist Norcross. "As a human being, you were required to visit the psych lab every month, where your changed pattern was recorded by the mind machine. The pseudo-life girl could never lose more than a month of the human being's life. What was your regular appointment date?"

"The 21st."

"Let's see—you died yesterday, so that would be only three days gone. We're very fortunate."

"But won't he notice a difference in me?"

"Absolutely not."

"Am I—still capable of love?"

Scientist Norcross blew a plume of rainbow smoke into the air. "Suppose, my dear, we find out."

Monica Drake Lane agreed, for morality, which is essentially organized taboo that changes as society changes, had, in the 26th Century, been confined exclusively to eating. Scientist Norcross had often amused himself by imagining how people of other ages would have been outraged by the moral standards of his own era, but his famous sense of humor was not rugged enough to be amused by the moral standards of the past. Not, at any rate, if he had had to endure them, though he found them sufficiently comic as history.

She built a bower, an attractive courtship custom that had been adopted from the birds, and the day ended much more pleasantly than Scientist Norcross had expected at lunch.

THE reports came in from Prime Center. Drumstetter stayed in Los Angeles two days, in San Francisco three, and then consulted with Dowson in Honolulu. He skipped to New Zealand, back north to Japan, and swung across Siberia with short stops at various laboratories and universities. He was in Finland for three days with old Scientist Theophil Gertsley, who, though little better than a witch doctor, called himself a psychologist.

When John Davis Drumstetter set his skip down beside the live oak tree, Scientist Norcross and Monica Drake Lane were waiting for him. He was gaunt from hunger and weary from travel, but the expression in his eyes was

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not one to be assuaged by any food cubicle. Nor was it love he had been seeking and not found, for Prime Center had seen to it that opportunities were offered, from austere tropical girls to the warmth-seeking women of the north, who would even eat with a member of the opposite sex.

He greeted Scientist Norcross and his fiancee with an offhandedness that Norcross had not expected, and asked that he be excused from any long immediate association with them, due to the press of uncompleted work.

"But, Johnny," said Monica Drake Lane, "I've made a bower close by, and you seem very tired."

"There's work to be done," said the young man firmly. "I have no time to— Wait. I'll see your bower."

As they walked over the lush artificial grass, Scientist Norcross explained that his results from the overdrive relay equations were in the mind machine even now, but John Davis Drumstetter only patted him on the shoulder in a friendly way and told him not to bother.

When they reached the bower, Scientist Norcross expected that Drumstetter would sleep there after all, for it was an exceptionally pleasant design. The force field was night, and the sky was filled with adapted creatures from Mars dancing to their susurrate music, and the air was permeated with the bitter-sweet and exciting scent of a Venusian lake, the very odor of romance. In the background was the song of the sea.

John Davis Drumstetter stepped out of the bower and said gently, "It's one of the nicest I've ever seen, and we spent some happy nights in it a year ago, didn't we, Monica?"

He kissed her gently, as he might kiss a child, and walked back to the oak tree.

"He's behaving very oddly," reported Norcross to Prime Center, as soon as he could, and gave the details.

"I'd give a lot to have him meet a human female," said Prime Center wistfully.

"What shall I do?"

"Stay with him and wait," ordered Prime Center. "This is the first time the hopes of humanity lie in one man. Remember that. We can only serve," he added bitterly. "He hasn't tested the final limitation? Good. Keep me informed."

JOHN DAVIS DRUMSTETTER stayed beside his huge mind machine for nearly a week, and, though he was only sixty, he looked like an old man when he greeted Monica and Norcross at the end of that time.

"The relay is finished," he an-

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nounced. "It's being installed in the *Last Hope* now. That's what I'm calling my ship, the ship to make mankind free of the stars. My work on Earth is nearly done."

"But, Johnny darling," said Monica Drake Lane, looking up at him through her eyelashes, "what about our marriage?"

He looked at her with grim pity. "The bower was an old bower," he answered. "Did you have the courage to be a unique in a patterned world? Can you reproduce, Monica Drake Lane?"

"Oh, Johnny—"

"The final limitation!" he said. "Humans have the power to command pseudo-life. Pseudo-life, answer! I command!"

She sank to the ground.

"No," she said, "no, Johnny, I can't have a baby. I died over a month ago. I'm sorry you found out."

John Davis Drumstetter turned on Scientist William Manning Norcross. "You've done no new work because you have no capacity for it. Correct? Answer, pseudo-life, I command!"

Norcross lifted a calm face. "Why, yes," he said, "I'm pseudo-life. Have been for over two years. But don't you worry, Johnny, it's better this way and only natural that—"

John Davis Drumstetter paid no attention. He spoke as if explaining to himself. "You see, they're pseudo-life, dancing to the very end of the masquerade ball that started so long ago. It began when measurable science, the science of finity, made a finite man, a man *nearly* as good. It was the mental climate of an age that wanted its books digested, and then abandoned reading for television. They froze food and precooked it and said it was even better than garden fresh vegetables.

"Do it the easy way, they said, never knowing that the hard way is the only way in the last analysis. Why try to cure a neurotic when you can make a pseudo-life of him? Don't let his grieving friends and relations suffer; provide them with a pseudo-life. He's just the same, they said, and he's not sick. And should a man die? Oh, no! Make a pseudo-life for his wife and children."

"But, Johnny—"

"Be still, pseudo-life! Why bother with men who were beginning to understand the human mind, when you can create pseudo-life? The cheap drives out the good every time. Oh, with the kindliest intentions, with the softest sympathies! Hide. Conceal. The truth be damned!"

"But, Johnny darling—" began Monica Drake Lane.

"Be still, pseudo-life. There's one more thing, the final capstone

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to mankind's pyramid of folly." He got Prime Center on the communication. "Answer, pseudo-life, I command. Am I the last human being on Earth?"

"Since you put it that way," said Prime Center reluctantly, "you are."

"And in the Solar System?"

"I'm afraid so."

The communication dropped from John Davis Drumstetter's hand.

"This is the logical conclusion," he said slowly. "The actors are playing on a stage of worlds for an audience of one. At the solar observatory on Mercury, astronomers study the Sun and send in their reports, in case I should glance at them. In the mines of Pluto, miners dig ore to provide a market quotation I might see in the telepapers."

He kicked the communication across the floor.

"Get out," he told them with infinite weariness. "The last human being commands."

HE slept for a day and had breakfast in *full public view* under a tree. Peeping Toms of both sexes watched him.

Prime Center appeared in person just as he finished mopping up the last of his once-over-lightly egg. Prime Center coughed and blushed and looked away, and John Davis Drumstetter laughed aloud, humorlessly.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully.

"Hm, yes," said Prime Center.

"Sit down. Have an egg?" A wicked light appeared in his eyes, and he went on in a low, sinister voice, "A coddled egg, soft and white and runny? Maybe you want to gulp some coffee? Or snap your way through a piece of crackling toast? No?" His guest was turning pale and sick-looking. "Well, let me finish this bacon, and state your business."

He threw back his head and slipped the bacon into his mouth. Prime Center shuddered.

"Scientist Drumstetter," he said, keeping his gaze fixed on the trunk of the tree, "I have come to offer you all the worlds. Yes, the whole Solar System, including the asteroids and Pluto. You will be more powerful than Alexander or Caesar or Stalin or O'Toole. We will create a new office — Prime *Squared* Center — to rule the Solar System. Do you mind not doing that?"

John Davis Drumstetter was licking his fingers thoughtfully. He nodded.

"Then you accept?"

"No, I'm through licking my fingers. I'll give you your answer on a systemwide communication. Arrange it, pseudo-life, immediately."

As a concession to morality,

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John Davis Drumstetter agreed to step into a molecular cleanup booth. When he came out again, he spoke to the worlds and all the ships in space:

"My friends, from now on the blind will lead the blind. Moral obliquity has triumphed and becomes common morality." He laughed and rubbed his nose. "I'm sorry. I was speaking to an audience of one—myself. What I want you billions to do is to continue your work, to maintain the system as it now stands. Pseudo-life will be replaced with pseudo-life till the end of time. It will be a static world. It will be a nearly-as-good world. It will be a pleasant world by your standards. I wish you to do this, and you must, of course, obey my command. My purpose reaches a little beyond your natural inclination; this system will serve as a fertile warning to any beings with intelligence who may come after me.

"I will not be with you long, myself—"

"Suicide?" asked Prime Center hopefully.

"Alpha Centauri," said John Davis Drumstetter with a chuckle. "The colonists left because they didn't like pseudo-life, either. Good-by to you all."

He snapped off the communication, waved to the little group under the tree, and entered the *Last Hope*. The entry port swung closed. The force field glowed, and then the ship was gone, leaving behind a whirlwind of dust.

"Alpha Centauri?" asked Monica Drake Lane.

"Following the others of his wild, unstable breed," said Scientist Norcross.

"Easy come, easy go," the girl said, shrugging.

Prime Center had the last word. "Yes, and good riddance. Human beings have always been a nuisance."

—WALLACE MACFARLANE

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THE GIRLS FROM EARTH

Problem: How can you arrange marriages with men in one solar system, women in another—and neither willing to leave his own world?

By FRANK M. ROBINSON

Illustrated by EMSH

I

"THE beasts aren't much help, are they?"

Karl Allen snatched a breath of air and gave another heave on the line tied to the raft of parampa logs bobbing in the middle of the river.

"No," he grunted, "they're not. They always balk at a time like this, when they can see it'll be hard work."

Joseph Hill wiped his plump face and coiled some of the rope's slack around his thick waist.

"Together now, Karl. *One! Two!*"

They stood knee-deep in mud on the bank, pulling and strain-

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ing on the rope, while some few yards distant, in the shade of a grove of trees, their tiny yllumphs nibbled grass and watched them critically, but made no effort to come closer.

"If we're late for ship's landing, Joe, we'll get crossed off the list."

Hill puffed and wheezed and took another hitch on the rope.

"That's what I've been thinking about," he said, worried.

They took a deep breath and hauled mightily on the raft rope. The raft bobbed nearer. For a moment the swift waters of the Karazoo threatened to tear it out of their grasp, and then it was beached, most of it solidly, on the muddy bank. One end of it still lay in the gurgling, rushing waters, but that didn't matter. They'd be back in ten hours or so, long before the heavy raft could be washed free.

"How much time have we got, Karl?"

The ground was thick with shadows, and Karl cast a critical eye at them. He estimated that even with the refusal of their yllumphs to help beach the raft, they still had a good two hours before the rocket put down at Landing City.

"Two hours, maybe a little more," he stated hastily when Hill looked more worried. "Time enough to get to Landing City and put in for our numbers on the list."

He turned back to the raft, untied the leather and horn saddles, and threw them over the backs of their reluctant mounts. He cinched his saddle and tied on some robes and furs behind it.

Hill watched him curiously. "What are you taking the furs for? This isn't the trading rocket."

"I know. I thought that when we come back tonight, it might be cold and maybe *she'll* appreciate the coverings then."

"You never would have thought of it yourself," Hill grunted. "Grundy must have told you to do it, the old fool. If you ask me, the less you give them, the less they'll come to expect. Once you spoil them, they'll expect you to do all the trapping and the farming and the family-raising yourself."

"You didn't have to sign up," Karl pointed out. "You could have applied for a wife from some different planet."

"One's probably just as good as another. They'll all have to work the farms and raise families."

Karl laughed and aimed a friendly blow at Hill. They finished saddling up and headed into the thick forest.

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IT was quiet as Karl guided his mount along the dimly marked trail and he caught himself thinking of the return trip he would be making that night. It would be nice to have somebody new to talk to. And it would be good to have somebody to help with the trapping and tanning, somebody who could tend the small vegetable garden at the rear of his shack and mend his socks and wash his clothes and cook his meals.

And it was time, he thought soberly, that he started to raise a family. He was mid-twenty now, old enough to want a wife and children.

"You going to raise a litter, Joe?"

Hill started. Karl realized that he had probably been thinking of the same thing.

"One of these days I'll need help around the sawmill," Hill answered defensively. "Need some kids to cut the trees, a couple more to pole them down the river, some to run the mill itself and maybe one to sell the lumber in Landing City. Can't do it all myself."

He paused a moment, thinking over something that had just occurred to him.

"I've been thinking of your plans for a garden, Karl. Maybe I ought to have one for my wife to take care of, too."

Karl chuckled. "I don't think she'll have the time!"

They left the leafy expanse of the forest and entered the grasslands that sloped toward Landing City. He could even see Landing City itself on the horizon, a smudge of rusting, corrugated steel shacks, muddy streets, and the small rocket port—a scorched thirty acres or so fenced off with barbed wire.

Karl looked out of the corner of his eye at Hill and felt a vague wave of uneasiness. Hill was a big, thick man wearing the soiled clothes and bristly stubble of a man who was used to living alone and who liked it. But once he took a wife, he would probably have to keep himself in clean clothes and shave every few days. It was even possible that the woman might object to Hill letting his yllumph share the hut.

The path was getting crowded, more of the colonists coming onto the main path from the small side trails.

Hill broke the silence first. "I wonder what they'll be like."

Karl looked wise and nodded knowingly. "They're Earthwomen, Joe. *Earth!*"

It was easy to act as though he had some inside information, but Karl had to admit to himself that he actually knew very little about it. He was a Second System colonist and had never even

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seen an Earthwoman. He had heard tales, though, and even discounting a large percentage of them, some of them must have been true. Old Grundy at the rocket office, who should know about these things if anybody did, seemed disturbingly lacking on definite information, though he had hinted broadly enough. He'd whistle softly and wink an eye and repeat the stories that Karl had already heard; but he had nothing *definite* to offer, no real facts at all.

Some of the other colonists whom they hadn't seen for the last few months shouted greetings, and Karl began to feel some of the carnival spirit. There was Jenkins, who had another trapping line fifty miles farther up the Karazoo; Leonard, who had the biggest farm on Midplanet; and then the fellow who specialized in catching and breaking in yllumphs, whose name Karl couldn't remember.

"They say they're good workers," Hill said.

Karl nodded. "Pretty, too."

They threaded their way through the crowded and muddy streets. Landing City wasn't big, compared to some of the cities on Altair, where he had been raised, but Karl was proud of it. Some day it would be as big as any city on any planet—maybe even have a population of ten thousand people or more.

"Joe," Karl said suddenly, "what's supposed to make women from Earth better than women from any other world?"

Hill located a faint itch and frowned. "I don't know, Karl. It's hard to say. They're—well, sophisticated, glamorous."

Karl absorbed this in silence. Those particular qualities were, he thought, rather hard to define.

The battered shack that served as rocket port office and headquarters for the colonial office on Midplanet loomed up in front of them. There was a crowd gathered in front of the building and they forced their way through to see what had caused it.

"We saw this the last time we were here," Hill said.

"I know," Karl agreed, "but I want to take another look." He was anxious to glean all the information that he could.

It was a poster of a beautiful woman leaning toward the viewer. The edges of the poster were curling and the colors had faded during the last six months, but the girl's smile seemed just as inviting as ever. She held a long-stemmed goblet in one hand and was blowing a kiss to her audience with the other. Her green eyes sparkled, her smile was provocative. A quoted sentence read: "I'm from *Earth!*" There was nothing more except a printed

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list of the different solar systems to which the colonial office was sending the women.

She was real pretty, Karl thought. A little on the thin side, maybe, and the dress she was wearing would hardly be practical on Midplanet, but she had a certain something. Glamor, maybe?

A loudspeaker blared.

"All colonists waiting for the wife draft assemble for your numbers! All colonists . . ."

There was a jostling for places and then they were in the rapidly moving line. Grundy, fat and important-looking, was handing out little blue slips with numbers on them, pausing every now and then to tell them some entertaining bit of information about the women. He had a great imagination, nothing else.

Karl drew the number 53 and hurried to the grassy lot beside the landing field that had been decorated with bunting and huge welcome signs for the new arrivals. A table was loaded with government pamphlets meant to be helpful to newly married colonists. Karl went over and stuffed a few in his pockets. Other tables had been set out and were loaded with luncheon food, fixed by the

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few colonial women in the community. Karl caught himself eying the women closely, wondering how the girls from Earth would compare with them.

He fingered the ticket in his pocket. What would the woman be like who had drawn the companion number 53 aboard the rocket? For when it landed, they would pair up by numbers. The method had its drawbacks, of course, but time was much too short to allow even a few days of getting acquainted. He'd have to get back to his trapping lines and he imagined that Hill would have to get back to his sawmill and the others to their farms. What the hell, you never knew what you were getting either way, till it was too late.

"Sandwich, mister? Pop?"

Karl flipped the boy a coin, picked up some food and a drink, and wandered over to the landing field with Hill. There were still ten minutes or so to go before the rocket landed, but he caught himself straining his sight at the blue sky, trying to see a telltale flicker of exhaust flame.

The field was crowded and he caught some of the buzzing conversation.

". . . never knew one myself, but let me tell you . . ."

". . . knew a fellow once who married one, never had a moment's rest afterward . . ."

". . . no comparison with colonial women. They got culture . . ."

". . . I'd give a lot to know the girl who's got number twenty-five . . ."

"Let's meet back here with the girls who have picked our numbers," Hill said. "Maybe we could trade."

Karl nodded, though privately he felt that the number system was just as good as depending on first impressions.

There was a murmur from the crowd and he found his gaze riveted overhead. High above, in the misty blue sky, was a sudden twinkle of fire.

He reached up and wiped his sweaty face with a muddy hand and brushed aside a straggly lock of tangled hair. It wouldn't hurt to try to look his best.

The twinkling fire came nearer.

II

"A MR. MACDONALD to see you, Mr. Escher."

Claude Escher flipped the intercom switch.

"Please send him right in."

That was entirely superfluous, he thought, because MacDonald would come in whether Escher wanted him to or not.

The door opened and shut with a slightly harder bang than usual and Escher mentally braced him-

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self. He had a good hunch what the problem was going to be and why it was being thrown in their laps.

MacDonald made himself comfortable and sat there for a few minutes, just looking grim and not saying anything. Escher knew the psychology by heart. A short preliminary silence is always more effective in browbeating subordinates than an initial furious bluster.

He lit a cigarette and tried to outwait MacDonald. It wasn't easy — MacDonald had great staying powers, which was probably why he was the head of the department.

Escher gave in first. "Okay, Mac, what's the trouble? What do we have tossed in our laps now?"

"You know the one—colonization problem. You know that when we first started to colonize, quite a large percentage of the male population took to the stars, as the saying goes. The adventuresome, the gamblers, the frontier type all decided they wanted to head for other worlds, to get away from it all. The male of the species is far more adventuresome than the female; the men left—but the women didn't. At least, not in nearly the same large numbers.

"Well, you see the problem. The ratio of women to men here on Earth is now something like five to three. If you don't know what that means, ask any man with a daughter. Or any psychiatrist. Husband-hunting isn't just a pleasant pastime on Earth. It's an earnest cutthroat business and I'm not just using a literary phrase."

He threw a paper on Escher's desk. "You'll find most of the statistics about it in that, Claude. Notice the increase in crimes peculiar to women. Shoplifting, badger games, poisonings, that kind of thing. It's quite a list. You'll also notice the huge increase in petty crimes, a lot of which wouldn't have bothered the courts before. In fact, they wouldn't even have been considered crimes. You know why they are now?"

Escher shook his head blankly.

"Most of the girls in the past who didn't catch a husband," MacDonald continued, "grew up to be the type of old maid who's dedicated to improving the morals and what-not of the rest of the population. We've got more puritanical societies now than we ever had, and we have more silly little laws on the books as a result. You can be thrown in the pokey for things like violating a woman's privacy—whatever that means—and she's the one who decides whether what you say or do is a violation or not."

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Escher looked bored. "Not to mention the new prohibition which forbids the use of alcohol in everything from cough medicines to hair tonics. Or the cleaned up moral code that reeks —if you'll pardon the expression —of purity. Sure, I know what you mean. And you know the solution. All we have to do is get the women to colonize."

MacDonald ran his fingers nervously through his hair.

"But it won't be easy, and that's why it's been given to us. It's your baby, Claude. Give it a lot of thought. Nothing's impossible, you know."

"Perpetual motion machines are," Escher said quietly. "And pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. But I get the point. Nevertheless, women just don't want to colonize. And who can blame them? Why should they give up living in a luxury civilization, with as many modern conveniences as this one, to go homesteading on some wild, unexplored planet where they have to work their fingers to the bone and play footsie with wild animals and savages who would just as soon skin them alive as not?"

"What do you advise I do, then?" MacDonald demanded. "Go back to the Board and tell them the problem is not solvable, that we can't think of anything?"

Escher looked hurt. "Did I say that? I just said it wouldn't be easy."

"The Board is giving you a blank check. Do anything you think will pay off. We have to stay within the letter of the law, of course, but not necessarily the spirit."

"When do they have to have a solution?"

"As soon as possible. At least within the year. By that time the situation will be very serious. The psychologists say that what will happen then won't be good."

"All right, by then we'll have the answer."

MacDonald stopped at the door. "There's another reason why they want it worked out. The number of men applying to the Colonization Board for emigration to the colony planets is falling off."

"How come?"

MacDonald smiled. "On the basis of statistics alone, would you want to emigrate from a planet where the women outnumber the men five to three?"

When MacDonald had gone, Escher settled back in his chair and idly tapped his fingers on the desk-top. It was lucky that the Colonization Board worked on two levels. One was the well-publicized, idealistic level where nothing was too good and every deal was 99 and 44/100 per cent pure. But when things got too

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difficult for it to handle on that level, they went to Escher and MacDonald's department. The coal mine level. Nothing was too low, so long as it worked. Of course, if it didn't work, you took the lumps, too.

He rummaged around in his drawer and found a list of the qualifications set up by the Board for potential colonists. He read the list slowly and frowned. You had to be physically fit for the rigors of space travel, naturally, but some of the qualifications were obviously silly. You couldn't guarantee physical perfection in the second generation, anyway.

He tore the qualification list in shreds and dropped it in the disposal chute. That would have to be the first to go.

There were other things that could be done immediately. For one thing, as it stood now, you were supposed to be financially able to colonize. Obviously a stupid and unappealing law. That would have to go next.

He picked up the sheet of statistics that MacDonald had left and read it carefully. The Board could legalize polygamy, but that was no solution in the long run. Probably cause more problems than it would solve. Even with women as easy to handle as they were nowadays, one was still enough.

Which still left him with the main problem of how to get people to colonize who didn't *want* to colonize.

The first point was to convince them that they wanted to. The second point was that it might not matter whether they wanted to or not.

No, it shouldn't be hard to solve at all—provided you held your nose, silenced your conscience, and were willing to forget that there was such a thing as a moral code.

III

PHYLLIS HANSON put the cover over her typewriter and locked the correspondence drawer. Another day was done, another evening about to begin.

She filed into the washroom with the other girls and carefully redid her face. It was getting hard to disguise the worry lines, to paint away the faint crow's-feet around her eyes.

She wasn't, she admitted to herself for the thousandth time, what you would call beautiful. She inspected herself carefully in her compact mirror. In a sudden flash of honesty, she had to admit that she wasn't even what you would call pretty. Her face was too broad, her nose a fraction too long, and her hair was dull. Not homely, exactly—but not pretty, either.

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Conversation hummed around her, most of it from the little group in the corner, where the extreme few who were married sat as practically a race apart. Their advice was sought; their suggestions avidly followed.

"Going out tonight, Phyl?"

She hesitated a moment, then slowly painted on the rest of her mouth. The question was technically a privacy violator, but she thought she would sidestep it this time, instead of refusing to answer point-blank.

"I thought I'd stay home tonight. Have a few things I want to rinse out."

The black-haired girl next to her nodded sympathetically. "Sure, Phyl, I know what you mean. Just like the rest of us—waiting for the phone to ring."

Phyllis finished washing up and then left the office, carefully noting the girl who was waiting for the boss. The girl was beautiful in a hard sort of way, a platinum blonde with an entertainer's busty figure. Waiting for a plump, middle-aged man like a stagestruck kid outside a theatre.

At home, in her small two-room, bachelor-girl apartment, she stripped and took a hot, sudsing shower, then stepped out and toweled herself in front of a mirror. She frowned slightly. You didn't know whether you should keep yourself in trim just on some off-chance, or give up and let yourself go.

She fixed dinner, took a moderately long time doing the dishes, and went through the standard routine of getting a book and curling up on the sofa. It was a good book of the bootlegged variety — scientifically written with enough surplus heroes and heroines and lushly described love affairs to hold anybody's interest.

It held hers for ten pages and then she threw the book across the room, getting a savage delight at the way the pages ripped and fluttered to the floor.

What was the use of kidding herself any longer, of trying to live vicariously and hoping that some day she would have a home and a husband? She was thirty now; the phone hadn't rung in the last three years. She might as well spend this evening as she had spent so many others—call up the girls for a bridge game and a little gossip, though heaven knew you always ended up envying the people you were gossiping about.

Perhaps she should have joined one of the organizations at the office that did something like that seven nights out of every seven. A bridge game or a benefit for some school or a talk on art. Or she could have joined the Lecture of the Week club, or the YWCA,

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or any one of the other government-sponsored clubs designed to fill the void in a woman's life.

But bridge games and benefits and lectures didn't take the place of a husband and family. She was kidding herself again.

She got up and retrieved the battered book, then went over to the mail slot. She hadn't had time to open her mail that morning; most of the time it wasn't worth the effort. Advertisements for book clubs, lecture clubs, how to win at bridge and canasta . . .

Her fingers sprang the metal tabs on a large envelope and she took out the contents and spread it wide.

She gasped. It was a large poster, about a yard square. A man was on it, straddling a tiny city and a small panorama of farms and forests at his feet. He was a handsome specimen, with wavy blond hair and blue eyes and a curly mat on his bare chest that was just enough to be attractive without being apelike. He held an axe in his hands and was eying her with a clearly inviting look of brazen self-confidence.

It was definitely a privacy violator and she should notify the authorities immediately!

Bright lettering at the top of the poster shrieked: "Come to the Colonies, the Planets of Romance!"

Whoever had mailed it should be arrested and imprisoned! Preying on . . .

The smaller print at the bottom was mostly full of facts and figures. The need for women out on the colony planets, the percentage of men to women — a startling disproportion—the comfortable cities that weren't nearly as primitive as people had imagined, and the recently reduced qualifications.

She caught herself admiring the man on the poster. Naturally, it was an artist's conception, but even so . . .

And the cities were far in advance of the frontier settlements, where you had to battle disease and dirty savages.

It was all a dream. She had never done anything like this and she wouldn't think of doing it now. And had any of her friends seen the poster? Of course, they probably wouldn't tell her even if they had.

But the poster was a violation of privacy. Whoever had sent it had taken advantage of information that was none of their business. It was up to her to notify the authorities!

SHE took another look at the poster.

The letter she finally finished writing was very short. She addressed it to the box number in the upper left-hand corner of the

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plain wrapper that the poster had come in.

IV

THE dress lay on the counter, a small corner of it trailing off the edge. It was a beautiful thing, sheer sheen satin trimmed in gold nylon thread. It was the kind of gown that would make anybody who wore it look beautiful. The price was high, much too high for her to pay. She knew she would never be able to buy it.

But she didn't intend to buy it.

She looked casually around and noted that nobody was watching her. There was another woman a few counters down and a man, obviously embarrassed, at the lingerie counter. Nobody else was in sight. It was a perfect time. The clerk had left to look up a difficult item that she had purposely asked for and probably wouldn't be back for five minutes.

Time enough, at any rate.

The dress was lying loose, so she didn't have to pry it off any hangers. She took another quick look around, then hurriedly bundled it up and dropped it in her shopping bag.

She had taken two self-assured steps away from the counter when she felt a hand on her shoulder. The grip was firm and muscular and she knew she had

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lost the game. She also knew that she had to play it out to the end, to grasp any straw.

"Let go of me!" she ordered in a frostily offended voice.

"Sorry, miss," the man said politely, "but I think we have a short trip to take."

She thought for a moment of brazening it out further and then gave up. She'd get a few weeks or months in the local detention building, a probing into her background for the psychological reasons that prompted her to steal, and then she'd be out again.

They couldn't do anything to her that mattered.

She shrugged and followed the detective calmly. None of the shoppers had looked up. None seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary.

In the detention building she thanked her good luck that she was facing a man for the sentence, instead of one of the puritanical old biddies who served on the bench. She even found a certain satisfaction in the presence of the cigar smoke and the blunt, earthy language that floated in from the corridor.

"Why did you steal it?" the judge asked. He held up the dress, which, she noted furiously, didn't look nearly as nice as it had under the department store lights.

"I don't have anything to say," she said. "I want to see a lawyer."

She could imagine what he was thinking. Another tough one, another plain jane who was shoplifting for a thrill.

And she probably was. You had to do *something* nowadays. You couldn't just sit home and chew your fingernails, or run out and listen to the endless boring lectures on art and culture.

"Name?" he asked in a tired voice.

She knew the statistics he wanted. "Ruby Johnson, 32, 145 pounds, brown hair and green eyes. Prints on file."

The judge leaned down and mentioned something to the bailiff, who left and presently came back with a ledger. The judge opened it and ran his fingers down one of the pages.

The sentence would probably be the usual, she thought—six months and a fine, or perhaps a little more when they found out she had a record for shoplifting.

A stranger in the courtroom in the official linens of the government suddenly stepped up beside the judge and looked at the page. She could hear a little of what he said:

". . . anxiety neurosis . . . obvious feeling of not being wanted . . . probably steals to attract attention . . . recommend emigration."

"In view of some complicating

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factors, we're going to give you a choice," the judge finally said. "You can either go to the penitentiary for ten years and pay a $10,000 fine, or you can ship out to the colony planets and receive a five-hundred-dollar immigration bonus."

She thought for a minute that she hadn't heard right. Ten thousand dollars and ten years! It was obvious that the state was interested in neither the fine nor in paying her room and board for ten years. She could recognize a squeeze play when she saw it, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"I wouldn't call that a choice," she said sourly. "I'll ship out."

V

SUZANNE was proud of the apartment. It had all the modern conveniences, like the needle shower with the perfume dispenser, the built-in soft-drink bar in the library, the all-communications set, and the electrical massager. It was a nice, comfortable setup, an illusion of security in an ever-changing world.

She lit a cigarette and chuckled. Mrs. Burger, the fat old landlady, thought she kept up the apartment by working as a buyer for one of the downtown stores.

Well, maybe some day she would.

But not today. And not tonight.

The phone rang and she answered in a casual tone. She talked for a minute, then let a trace of sultriness creep into her voice. The conversation wasn't long.

She let the receiver fall back on the base and went into the bedroom to get a hat box. She wouldn't need much; she'd probably be back that same night.

It was a nice night and since the address was only a few blocks away, she decided to walk it. She blithely ignored the curious stares from other pedestrians, attracted by the sharp, clicking sound of her heels on the sidewalk.

The address was a brownstone that looked more like an office building than anything else, but then you could never tell. She pressed the buzzer and waited a moment for the sound to echo back and forth on the inside. She pressed it again and a moment later a suave young man appeared in the doorway.

"Miss Carstens?"

She smiled pertly.

"We've been expecting you."

She wondered a little at the "we," but dutifully smiled and followed him in.

The glare of the lights inside the office blinded her for a moment. When she could focus them again, her smile became slightly blurry at the edges and then dis-

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appeared entirely. She wasn't alone. There was a battery of chairs against one side of the room. She recognized most of the girls sitting in them.

She forced a smile to her lips and tried to laugh.

"I'm sure there's been some mistake! Why, I never . . ."

The young man coughed politely. "I'm afraid there's been no mistake. Full name, please."

"Suzanne Carstens," she said grimly, and gave the other statistics he wanted. She idly wondered what stoolie had peddled the phone numbers.

"Suzanne Carstens," the young man noted, and slowly shook his head. "A very pretty name, but no doubt not your own. It actually doesn't matter, though. Take a seat over there."

She did as he asked and he faced the entire group.

"I and the other gentlemen here represent the Colonization Board. We've interceded with the local authorities in order to offer you a choice. We would like to ship you out to the colony planets. Naturally, we will pay you the standard emigration bonus of five hundred dollars. The colonists need wives; they offer you —security."

He stressed the word slightly.

"Now, of course, if you don't prefer the colony planets, you can stay behind and face the penalties of ten years in jail and a fine of ten thousand dollars."

Suzanne felt that her lower jaw needed support. Ten thousand dollars and ten years! And in either case she'd lose the apartment she had worked so hard for, her symbol of security.

"Well, what do you say?" There was a dead silence. The young man from the Colonization Board turned to Suzanne. "How about you, Miss Carstens?"

She smiled sickly and nodded her head. "I *love* to travel!" she said.

It didn't sound at all witty, even to herself.

VI

THE transfer shed was a vast and somber terminal, cold and impersonal. There was a cleared space at the center of the floor where the officials had desks and tables and rows of filing cabinets and busily clicking machinery. The women sat huddled around the edges of the shed, waiting to be called to the center and assigned to any of the various colony planets.

Phyllis clutched her small suitcase, containing the few personal items she had been allowed to take on the trip, and silently swore that once she set foot on another planet, she'd never leave it, no matter what.

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"Draft 49 for the Huffer Solar System report to the routing desk! Draft 49 for the Huffer Solar System report to the routing desk!"

"That's us," Suzanne said drily. She and Phyllis and Ruby joined the others out on the floor.

"You understand," the routing official was saying, "that you're allowed your choice of planets in the Huffer Solar System. We'll read off occupational and other pertinent information and then you make your choice.

"Sunside: First planet from the system sun. Warm, humid climate. Fishing, flower-growing for export, mining, and natural handicrafts. Population ratio 7 to 1, males all somatypes and admixtures.

"Midplanet: Second planet out. Temperate climate. Farming, fur-trapping, slight manufacturing. Ratio 7 to 1, all somatypes and admixtures."

"Newman's body, last planet out from the system sun . . ."

He finished the list and gave them five minutes to decide. The names of the three planets appeared on the floor in glowing letters. When they had made up their minds, they were to go and stand on the name.

They held a short conference.

"It looks like it's a tossup between fish and furs," Ruby said. "I think I'll take Midplanet. I like furs better than fish."

They argued a moment longer, then picked up their belongings and went and stood on the luminous letters.

VII

NO doubt of it, the carpet made a fairly suitable green, Escher thought. He placed the ball firmly on the nap, stepped back a pace, and tapped it smartly with the golf club. It rolled in a beautifully straight path into the upturned water glass.

"Very nice shot, Claude."

Escher looked up and leaned the club against the side of the desk.

"I thought so, too," he agreed. "What brings you here, Mac?"

MacDonald sat down and poured himself a glass of water from the beaker on Escher's desk.

"Just wanted to pass on the compliments of the Board for the recent large upswing in woman emigrants to the colony planets."

Escher casually waved it aside. "It wasn't much. We just had to rid ourselves of some old-fashioned notions, that's all. I was afraid, though, that the Board might disapprove of our methods."

MacDonald thought for a moment.

"No, I guess they didn't. I can't recall any members of the

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Board complaining about it, at least. Apparently they felt that something drastic was needed. Or, more probably, they've kept themselves carefully ignorant of just how we did it. Oh, they know we violated privacy in a lot of cases, but they're willing to overlook it."

"Very white of them, I'm sure," Escher grunted. He took up the club and set the ball back on its carpet tee. "How about a game tomorrow afternoon?"

MacDonald shook his head. "It didn't bother the Board much, Claude, but I followed your advertising and I was down to the port to see a contingent of our new colonists take off. It bothers *me*, Claude. The ads you sent to the different planets, the whispering campaign we arranged for, the subtle propaganda we sent out—and then the women. Don't you think there will be some sort of howl? We've definitely led them to believe one thing and here we're sending them — well, the new colonists leave a lot to be desired."

Escher looked at him coldly. "Look, Mac, let's be cynical about this. That's why it was referred to us in the first place. Of course the girls we sent aren't the most beautiful or the most glamorous. Those girls are already married and you couldn't get them to leave, no matter what you did. The girls we sent are the ones who weren't wanted here on Earth. We even killed two birds with one stone and solved the crime problem."

He held up his hand when MacDonald started to object.

"Don't say it, Mac. Stop and think for a moment. What danger can a shoplifter do on a colony planet? There's nothing to steal. And without large cities, most other types of crime will have equally tough sledding. Besides, we eliminated those who had natural criminal tendencies. Most of the others had drifted into it as an outlet for their sense of insecurity, the feeling of not being wanted."

MacDonald looked worried.

"All right, what happens when the colonists find out, Claude? What happens when they find out we shipped them the castoffs, the leftovers?"

"The point is, Mac, they'll never find out. They're Second System colonists. You know how the Colonization Board works. Planet A colonizes planet B. Planet B colonizes planet C. Given a suitable number of generations, the people on planet C will never have seen people from planet A. Earth is planet A, the colony planets to which the women were sent are all planet Cs.

"You see, the catch is that the

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colonists will have no basis on which to make comparisons. They've never seen women from Earth!"

"I still don't like it. They *have* seen women from other planets. After taking a look at the last shipload of females that left Earth, I'm still worried."

Escher laughed. "That's because you *haven't* seen some of the colony women, Mac. Tell me, what is the most cultured and socially up-to-date planet? Earth, of course. Now on what planet has husband-hunting and pleasing been developed into an all-out struggle with fine scientific techniques? Earth, again. The colonists don't have a chance.

"When it comes to catching and pleasing the male, the girls from Earth have really had an education. They can take care of themselves. Don't worry about that. Who's to tell the colonists the girls aren't the cream of the crop, anyway? Not the girls themselves, certainly. And not us. I tell you they'll never find out, Mac."

"You're positive that the colonists will be pleased with the women?"

Escher hesitated. "Well, reasonably." He sounded a little wistful. He practiced his swing a few more times, barely missing the lamp on his desk.

"I thought the advertising was rather clever, too. They'll feel a great obligation to us for sending them 'Earth's Fairest Daughters.' Be good for strengthening the ties to the mother planet."

MacDonald looked somewhat happier.

"What about the women themselves, though? We sold them a bill of goods, too, you know. They're expecting modern cities and handsome, rugged heroes for husbands. I know damn well that a lot of the colonies aren't much more than sinkholes and I suspect the sanitary, rugged, thoughtful male is strictly off the artist's drawing board. What happens when the women find that out?"

Escher took the ball out of the glass and went back a few paces for another try.

"Don't forget, Mac, the girls are the ones who weren't wanted here, the ones who were heading up for lives as old maids. They're going to planets where they're strictly a scarce item, where they'll be appreciated. The colonists will think they're getting something special and they'll treat the girls that way. They'll take good care of them. There might be a few difficulties at first, but it'll come out all right."

"In other words, the whole thing hinges on how the colonists receive the girls. Isn't that it?"

The ball thunked solidly into

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the glass again and rolled out.

"That's right. We've hedged our bets the best we can. Now we'll have to wait and see. But I don't think we have anything to worry about."

"Uh-huh," MacDonald grumbled. "It works out nice in theory, but I wonder how it'll be in practice."

VIII

PHYLLIS let the deceleration press her into the cot and tried to relax. In ten minutes they would be disembarking in Landing City. Landing City, with its wide, paved streets and modern buildings, the neatly laid-out farms and the modern rocket port.

There was a clanging of bells, a sudden feeling of nausea, and she knew they had landed. In the excited buzz of conversation from the others, she got her small suitcase and filed toward the hatch.

They took her name and gave her the emigration bonus, and then she was on the ramp going down, smelling the cool fresh air and feeling a damp breeze against her face.

She looked down . . .

The modern rocket port was a scorched expanse of dirty ground, with a rusting shed at one end that she guessed was the office. Landing City was a collection of rundown shacks and corrugated huts with mud streets and wooden sidewalks running between them.

She should have guessed, she thought bitterly. She had been sold a bill of goods. And there was no going back now; she was stuck with it.

Stuck with it.

She took another look. At least it would be healthy, and there was something besides the concrete and granite of a city to look at. It wouldn't be day in and day out of sitting eight hours behind a typewriter, and then back to her lonesome two rooms for an evening of bridge or a night with a boring book.

And there was nothing wrong with the town that couldn't be remedied and improved with a little work. She and the others would see to that. Progress was going to hit Landing City whether the colonists like it or not.

The colonists . . .

She stared at the whiskery, ragged lot of men of all shapes and sizes that were waiting to welcome them.

They had probably, she thought queerly, never heard a lecture on art in their lives. And they wouldn't have any interest in historical novels and it was an even-money bet that bridge and

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canasta games would bore them.

They were *uncultured,* she thought happily, *thoroughly* uncultured! Their main interest was probably in having a home and raising a family and working . . .

And with a shave and clean clothes, they might even be handsome! A dimly remembered poster of a blond-haired giant flashed into her mind, but she dismissed it. The men below had a hard, healthy look about them, a certain virility, an individuality that the pale men back on Earth, now that she thought of it, seemed to lack.

She was very definitely going to like it here.

Then she had a sudden, nagging thought.

How would the colonists take to her and the other bedraggled females?

IX

THE twinkling fire came nearer and they could make out the outlines of the slim ship. It rapidly grew in size and finally settled to a heavy, groaning rest on the pitted and blackened landing field.

Karl was holding his breath, staring at the outline of the hatch on the ship's rusty side. It opened and the flight of descent stairs slid out. The captain and crew came out first.

Then the women filed down the ladder, smiling timidly and looking cold and frightened.

Karl could hear Hill gulping noisily beside him and knew that his own mouth was gaping. But he couldn't help it.

The girls were gorgeous.

—FRANK M. ROBINSON

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The Furious Rose

By DEAN EVANS

This world was a setup for any man who wanted to get along — provided one had enough victims to toss to the wolves!

THE Master Clock on the black desk in the office of *Federal Executions* made a quiet blipping sound. Immediately the lights lowered to Emote Neutral. Long, probing shadow fingers snaked here and there across the floor, and a silence that should have been restful — and wasn't—descended on the place.

Illustrated by THORNE

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Tony Radek leaned back in his chair and frowned. One-fifteen in the morning. At one-fifteen in the morning no man, no matter who, should be going to his Neg-Emote. Why not hang a man instead? Or electrocute him? Or gas him the way they used to back in the old days? In those old days his grandfather used to talk about, where twelve ordinary citizens said the word that peeled the life off a man like skinning an onion.

He sighed softly and folded his hands across a tiny paunch that was just beginning to show. Tony Radek was getting old. He was a "safe" now. That meant he needn't worry about the war any longer. He was a nice, mild, peaceable gentleman who stayed at home and thought beautiful thoughts about the younger men out in space. A man his age didn't feel anger and hate and retribution and lust and treachery any more. He was just a little old fat guy. He was the Federal Executioner.

He frowned again and leaned forward and touched a nacre button on the desk top. That lit up the screen on his left. Not the Master Screen, which was the one on his right. This was the other, the one that could tell him what was going on outside the office, outside in *Portal Waiting*, where certain peculiar ghouls who derived a measure of excitement from the executions were allowed by the gracious State to hang out.

He stared at the screen. His frown deepened. *Portal Waiting* should be bare and vacant at this hour, but it wasn't. This was the third night in a row that it wasn't. There was a girl out there. A quiet girl, a girl who looked about as ghoulish as one of the nice red ritual roses over in the cooler built into the wall.

Damn the dame, why didn't she go home? Tony Radek's upper lip lifted a little, showing small angry teeth.

At once the Emote Neutral lights in the office flickered wildly. Tony pulled his eyes from the screen and glared up at the lights. That's progress for you. Let a man go on one little momentary emotional binge, like this, and right away spies in the joint start screaming. In a moment now, the one on his right — the Master Screen—would blink into life and old hell-hips himself would start poking around asking questions. Just see if it didn't.

He turned his head to the right, stared at the Master Screen and waited.

The screen blazed into life. A narrow-faced man with washed-away eyes that looked as though they'd seen sin and hadn't liked it peered angrily over toward Tony behind the desk.

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"*Mr.* Radek!" he had a thin, thin voice that sounded like a sheet of paper slitting down the middle. "What's going on down there? Can't you control your own office? Or maybe you'd like to be back in Training?" The eyes squinted sharply.

Tony worked up an innocent look. He spread his hands on the black surface of the desk, smiled, and said mildly: "Out of your mind. My lights have been as steady as old Emote Neutral herself. Probably that blonde you got Central Direction kidded into thinking you need as an assistant —probably you sneaked up on her when she was in Personal Lok and . . ."

"What?" The Master Screen trembled a little and the narrow-faced man's eyes seemed to jerk out of registration for a moment. "Look here, Radek, I've stood just about enough of your insinuations!"

"Look who's making the lights flicker now," said Tony calmly. He waved an arm around the office. Emote Neutral was flickering rapidly as though controlled by an interrupter switch. "Central Direction should see this," he observed.

He stared briefly at the contorted face on the screen. That face was working convulsively now, getting red like the ritual roses over in the cooler.

He snorted disgustedly, reached forward and touched the matswitch which threw the Master Screen into visi-lok. At once the screen darkened and all sound left the office.

That was more like it. Let old hell-hips up in Supplies and Control stew if he wanted, there wasn't anything in the Constitution—not even the old Constitution—that said a man had to sit and look at him.

"*Central Direction to Radek!*" a hard voice rapped out of the alternate speaker over in the corner.

Tony Radek jerked, spun around. He swallowed quickly, said nervously: "Yes, sir?"

"Radek, you're violating Ordinance Six, Code 325, Division of Security! Unlock that visi-screen at once!"

"Yes, sir." Tony's hand flew to the matswitch, pulled it. "Sorry. Elbow must have hit it accidentally. Didn't know it was locked . . ."

"Radek, there's a war on. That visi-lok must be used only in emergency. You know that."

"Yes, sir. Like I said . . ."

"I heard. In the future, be a little more careful. And, Radek—

"Yes, sir?"

"Ready Cell Two. Execution at one-twenty-seven. John Edward Haley. Convicted of mass interference of morale, City of Greater

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New Denver, as outlined under Congressional Act of April 12, 2250. Decision rendered equally on all three Final Master Machines."

"No appeal?" asked Tony very softly.

"No appeal. And, Radek—"

"Yes, sir?"

"The condemned is married. Check with Supplies and Control for bill of divorcement. His wife is a young woman, will have to marry again in the morning as outlined under Congressional Act of May 28, 2211. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

The Master Screen went dead. Tony blinked. Bill of divorcement. Will have to marry again in the morning as outlined under Congressional Act. By God, that's progress for you! He sat staring at the Master Screen for a long time.

Then he sighed, punched the button on Supplies and Control.

"Hell-hips!" he growled. "Snap it up. Execution at one-twenty-seven. Bill of divorcement."

The narrow face peered sourly out at him from the Master Screen. It didn't have much emotion in it now. It was almost blank, like the face of a humanoid robot somebody'd left something out of.

"Been hittin' the bottle again, huh?" said Tony.

"My name is Clacker, *Mr.* Radek. Arthur Jared Clacker. Kindly keep that in mind when you address me."

"Sure, sure. Nice name. Lovely name. Sounds like a stone-boat going over ground glass. Whip up that bill of divorcement."

"It's ready, *Mr.* Radek. *Been* ready for the last half hour. I suggest that if there were a little of my own well known and demonstrated efficiency in *your* office, perhaps Executions would be something to be proud of. Instead of what it is. Instead of the foul-smelling, sloppily run, lice-infested . . ."

Tony's hand reached out for the button on Supplies and Control. "Watch those lights," he said tiredly.

HE got up from the desk, stretched a little and went across the office to the cooler in the opposite wall. His feet made no noise; he had that quiet tread that all cats, a few men and some women achieve. His hand interrupted the automatic cellgard and a tiny, almost hidden door in the wall swung wide. He reached up, poked his hand in the cooler, felt around. A little smile came into his eyes. He took his hand out of the cooler, got up on tiptoes and looked inside: No roses. Not even one rose.

Not even *half* of a rose.

Chuckling, he went back to the

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desk and jabbed a finger at the button over Suplies and Control.

"Hell-hips!" he rapped. "Where's all that well known and demonstrated efficiency I've had to rake out of my ears?"

The narrow face lit up the Master Screen once more. It looked bored now. "*Mr.* Radek, there was something?"

"Yeah. Something." Tony's voice dropped, got deadly soft. "How many weeks since you checked the cooler, boy? There aren't any ritual roses."

"There—there aren't any?"

"That's right, Mr. Clacker. Now get away from that screen. I'm reporting this to Central Direction." His finger jammed down on the Supplies and Control button. He watched the Master Screen go blank and grinned. He thought, "Shake a little, Mr. Clacker, shake a little," because he didn't dare even whisper to himself.

He sat down at the desk again and thought of something. His finger went out, touched the button on the screen on the left—the *Portal Waiting* screen.

She was still there, hunched up in one of the chairs like a small child somebody had left in an interplanet waiting room and then gone away and forgotten. Tony frowned once more. Damn that dame, she was spoiling his nights.

He got up, crossed the office on silent feet, opened the door of Executions, went down a bare, silent hall. At the levelators he waited a moment for the platform, took it down, got off again at *Portal Waiting*, and crossed to the foyer.

She was there, just as she'd been on the screen upstairs, only clearer, more vivid, something witnessed instead of second hand, something with dimension to it. She was in a big chair that could have accommodated two like her. She had her legs tucked under her and her brown eyes that looked up at Tony's approach weren't any larger than two full moons.

He said, "Are you Mrs. John Haley?"

The girl nodded. "They — they've got Johnny . . ."

"I know." Tony dropped into a chair opposite the girl. "It's late," he said softly. "You shouldn't be here this time of night, Mrs. Haley."

The girl thought about that. "You're Mr. Radek, aren't you? In the Execution Office?"

"Call me Tony, Mrs. Haley."

"All right, Tony. Yes, it's late. I hadn't noticed, but I suppose you're right."

"You should go home, Mrs. Haley." He stopped, then lied a little. "They'll let you know. You don't have to worry."

You don't have to worry. They're bringing the guy up now,

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little girl, but you don't have to worry. Old hell-hips is getting a ritual rose now, little girl, but you don't have to worry.

As if he'd deliberately telepathed the thought, the girl said suddenly: "Tony, is—is it true about the furious roses? I mean, if a man is found guilty, do they—?"

"The 'furious' roses, Mrs. Haley?" He smiled. "I see. You mean because they're so red. Yes, it's true. Ritual roses, we call them, but that's nothing. Nothing at all. A custom only. A symbol handed down. It means nothing."

"I know." The girl nodded again. "When we were children, we always called them the furious roses because they were a furious red. We always used to say that if an innocent man was executed, the furious red rose would right away turn white, Tony. To show they'd been wrong about him."

He shrugged. "Bedtime stories, Mrs. Haley."

"Not—not that it means anything to me, Tony. They'll find Johnny innocent, of course. All three machines. The final machines."

Innocent? Oh, sure.

"A man," said Tony with a vague motion of his hands. "What's the difference what man a woman has? In the morning there's always another—and another name. What's the difference?" He smiled a small toy smile with eyes half closed so the girl couldn't look too closely into them.

But it was all right, she hadn't heard. At least she wasn't balling those big eyes of hers at him. She was looking down into her folded hands.

He continued, "There's a war on, Mrs. Haley. It seems there's always a war on, somehow. And everybody — you, me, the guy down the street who skins ships for a living—we all have to remember that. And yet some of us don't. Some of us go off on a tangent and try to sell out our country and then there's hell to pay. And if we're found guilty, we get the execution. The Neg-Emote."

The girl's lips began to tremble. She looked up. "Does it hurt, Tony? I mean . . ."

"Physically? No, of course not." A corner of his mouth curled. "We're humane nowadays, hadn't you heard? We just strap a man in a chair and press a button and down comes a metal hood over him. We press some more buttons and pull a switch or two, and that's that. No feeling, nothing. The man's as good as new except he has no emotions any more. No emotions whatever except personal physical pain, such as he'd need in case somebody stepped on his toe or jabbed him with a pin.

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The State wants us to protect ourselves, you see. It wouldn't want us getting hurt because we don't feel anything."

He stopped because it was getting harder to continued. "We used to call it 'stripping,' but that was long ago before the humane boys decided the term was a little cruel. Now it's just Neg-Emoting. But the same thing. Just a fancy title."

Her big eyes were suddenly eating into his. "What do they do with them, Tony?"

He shrugged again. "Send 'em off to Training. Some can be taught this, some that, but a living death nevertheless. What else can a traitor expect?"

The girl began to tremble all over. "Not Johnny! They can't do that to Johnny! He's innocent, Tony — he didn't do anything! Tony, tell them that! Tell them to let him go . . ."

He put his teeth together hard. What do you say to a woman who sits across from you, waiting the long, long wait? What do you say to a woman like this when you see the terror—and something else—in eyes like hers?

"You like the guy, Mrs. Haley?" he asked gently. "That's old-fashioned as hell, you know. We all learn that way back in primaries."

But the woman wasn't listening again, wasn't caring what he'd said. She began to whisper very softly:

"In the nights I used to be frightened. I used to lie there asleep and dream of the ships coming down and spraying the house with the burn-waves. And I could hear the roaring thunder of the jets and the house would start to shake and I'd try to yell, but I couldn't. Something inside would be choking me. And just when the burn-waves would be coming hot through the window and licking at the walls inside the room, I'd scream myself awake and jump up in bed and the sweat would be pouring off me."

Tony stared, incredulous, into the big balls of fright that her eyes had become.

"And then the lights would come on again, and there would be Johnny lying next to me smiling a little, and his curly hair would be all tousled from sleep, and he'd say to me, 'Baby, you've been dreaming again. Don't you know I'm here? Don't you know I'll always be here? Don't you know that, Baby?' And then it would be all right, and the roaring jets would be only the dawn shift going out on Security Patrol. And then I could go back to sleep again."

She stopped. *Portal Waiting* had become a gray ghost of a thing with nothing living in it, only the clouds of memory like

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smoke veils swirling, drifting here and there, soon gone.

And then: "They'll let him go, Tony. He's innocent, you know. They have to let him go."

He didn't look at her. He got up from his chair, put his hands rigidly at his sides. Then he did look, just once, and very hard.

"Get out of here!" he growled.

"No, Tony."

He took a deep breath, turned, went across the foyer to the levelators. As he passed under the huge Master Screen, her voice came again, but quite thin:

"You'll let me know, Tony? You'll let me know as soon as you get word?"

He didn't answer, didn't look back, didn't do anything except keep going to the levelators. He went upstairs, found the door of Executions, opened it, went through, let it slam shut.

THINGS started to happen. The Master Clock over on the black desk made a quiet blipping sound and the Emote Neutral lights went out. At once the office was flooded with Amber Official, the working lights. Then the Master Screen glowed and a narrow-faced man with washed-away eyes looked out at him.

"Condemned is waiting, *Mr.* Radek," the narrow-faced man said acidly. "Cell Two is getting dusty waiting for you, *Mr.* Radek. Very dusty."

Tony looked up. His heart wasn't in it, but he said it anyhow: "Go chase your blonde some more, hell-hips."

He went over to the desk, banged the Supplies and Control button, held it down. Master Screen darkened. He looked at the small square of white paper on the black desk top.

A bill of divorcement. Like that. So in the morning the kid downstairs could go out and get herself another mate and then she could go back to bed again and dream some more about the roaring jets and the burn-waves.

He reached up and wiped at his forehead. She didn't have to see it happen. Nothing in the Constitution—old or new—stated she had to see it happen. He looked down at the matswitch that controlled the visi-lok on the Master Screen. He clamped his teeth together and his hand went out and flipped the switch. The office went dead.

Maybe nobody'd notice. Maybe he'd have time to slip into Cell Two and get it over with before anybody noticed. He started across the room on fast, silent feet.

"*Radek!*" the alternate speaker over in the corner blasted out. He froze solid. "Radek, don't move! Stand where you are!"

Don't move? He couldn't have

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moved if he'd had jets on. And then the hard voice went on again: "Central Command to Supplies and Control. Use Emergency visi-relay. Unlock the Master Screen! This is Command 419, Regulation Four. Signed, Countersigned."

Almost at once the Master Screen flickered into life and a hard, severe-looking face appeared there. "Radek, turn around! Face the screen!"

"Yes, sir." Tony turned.

"Second violation, Radek. Why?"

Tony forced a blank face. He lifted his shoulders, said: "I was over here on my way to Cell Two for the Execution. How could I—"

"That will be all, Radek! Clear your desk. Prepare for judgment on final machines."

Tony swallowed. He didn't move because he couldn't move.

"Well, Radek?"

He fought his face clean, kept his hands rigid at his sides. Sweat was rolling down his back, but that was all right; Central Command couldn't be expected to see sweat roll down a man's back under his clothing, though a lot of people thought so.

"A suggestion, sir," he said at last.

"What?" Hard eyes bored into his own.

He let a little anxious look creep over his face. Not a guilty look—he hoped—but the kind of anxious look a worried but innocent man might have in a spot like this.

He said quickly: "About that visi-lok. I suggest it might have gone into lock by itself. You see, it's one of the old-fashioned kind, the type they used to have that worked with solenoids. We've had trouble with them before."

That brought a little silence. The hard eyes in the screen said at last: "Central Command to Supplies and Control. Is the visi-lok in Executions controlled by a solenoid? Was it never changed to relay?"

Tony gulped. He looked into the Master Screen, but he remained frozen to the floor, hardly breathing. And then a very thin voice answered nervously:

"I—I believe that's correct, sir. I believe Executions does have the old-fashioned solenoid. It seems there hasn't been time to change it. I've been intending to . . ."

The voice was cut off. The hard eyes came back to Tony. "Decision!" the hard voice said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Exonerated, Radek! Carry on with Execution in Cell-Two." The screen went blank.

Tony shuddered. A close one. A damned close one. That was the war for you. Even a man's breaths

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are counted. He went on shaky feet over to the cooler, reached in, got out a ritual rose, left the office and shuffled down the hall to Cell Two.

John Edward Haley. The condemned. A thin man, Tony thought. Well, sure, there aren't many fat men any more. Not in ordinary circumstances, that is.

The man was sitting tensely in the chair. There was no one else in the cell, which was as it should be, of course. Witnesses, yes—the Master Screen up on the wall—but not here, not visible.

Tony went across the Cell. "John Edward Haley," he said.

The man moved a nervous tongue over dry lips.

"John Edward Haley, you have been sentenced for Execution. Now hear these final words of the State as directed by Presidential order from Responsibility Official in the City of Greater New Denver, this night."

He took two small steps toward the man in the chair. He held out the red rose, put it in the hand of the other. Then he stepped back two steps until his toes were just touching a small plaque built into the floor. He looked down, read from the plaque:

"The giving of this rose. A symbol for the red of the blood of your brothers that you have let by treason and/or treachery. A symbol that as the rose is red, so are the unclean acts of your own hand, of your own mind. The State has so spoken."

He looked up. A nice way to kiss a guy off. Might as well tell him he bit his brother's finger, too, when he was a kid.

"Have you anything to say?" he asked.

The man's nervous tongue worked again. He said quickly:

"Yeah. Look, guy, just one thing. Just one favor. I don't give a damn what happens to me. Sure, I'm guilty. So you caught me, and so I take it. So what? A guy expects that. But the wife . . ."

Tony's teeth came together hard.

" . . . But the wife, see? She's down in *Portal Waiting*. Been there for three nights now. I don't want her to witness this. I don't want her to look into that Master Screen down there and see it. That's all I'm asking, guy, and it ain't much. Just a flick of a switch is all I'm asking. It ain't much. It ain't, is it?"

It ain't, hey? By God!

"When the hood comes down, she'll see it. She's bound to," the thin man went on fast. "She'll see the flash in the Screen and she'll know it's me, and she's never done anything to deserve that. That's all I'm asking, guy. That's all I'm asking."

The silence in the cell was a thick thing. Tony could feel the

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sweat rolling down his back again. But a different kind of a sweat now—not a sweat for himself, a sweat for somebody else. Just one finger touch on that visi-lok mat-switch would do it. Just one finger, and the small woman downstairs in *Portal Waiting* wouldn't know, would have one more instant of waiting, of hoping against hope. Of suspense. Of breathing in the air we all breathe in, of being alive, sentient; and knowing that her man, the thin fellow with the tousled, curly hair, was still sentient, too.

"Well, guy?"

Tony wet his lips. "Sorry, Haley. Petition refused." The hood came down. The Master Screen up on the wall blazed into life.

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TONY sat at his black desk with his hands folded, fingers laced. That's Executions for you. And this is war. There's a war on. Don't forget that. He looked down at his hands, sighed. Then he reached out and touched the Supplies and Control button.

"Hell-hips!" he growled.

He looked at the screen. It wasn't hell-hips. It was a blonde. Not a young blonde, a scarecrow blonde. An old wretched piece of living mechanism like himself.

"Where's Clacker?" he asked.

"Mr. Clacker is no longer with us, Mr. Radek."

"Huh? What happened to him?"

"Mr. Clacker has been taken to the three Final Machines for trial and judgment. I am now taking over here. My name is Hortense. G. Welker Hortense."

Tony looked at the blonde. Crude, undisguised lights were coming from the woman's eyes. Promotion-happy.

He said at last: "Sorry as hell about that. The solenoid thing, I suppose. I didn't mean to get the guy in trouble. I sure didn't mean that."

"He'd been ordered to change it. It was no one's fault but his own. You were only doing your duty, I'm sure. And duty comes above everything."

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. I know." He sighed once more. "Get me an airbrush and a bottle of white paint."

"What?"

"I want an airbrush and a bottle of white paint. I want to paint my nice little ritual roses. I don't like red any more. I want all white ones."

"Mr. Radek. . . ?"

Tony glared. "Do I get that paint or don't I? Don't just stand there!" His fist banged down on Supplies and Control button. The Master Screen went blank, and then flashed into motion again fast. The blonde again. Nasty now. A chip off the old block.

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Another hell-hips, but this time with skirts.

"Request not granted! This is entirely against regulations, Mr. Radek! Specifically, against ordinance 1991, of the Code of. . . ."

"Oh, can it," he growled wearily. "For God's sake, don't give me any more of that."

The blonde stiffened. "Well! After all, I'm only doing my duty, Mr. Radek. As head of Supplies and Control, I have certain well-defined and inflexible . . ."

Tony blacked her out. He held her blacked out till he was sure she wouldn't come on again. Duty.

The Master Clock made a quiet blipping noise. Amber Official lights dimmed and Emote Neutral came on. Long, probing shadow fingers snaked here and there across the floor, and a stillness that should have been restful descended eventually on the place.

"Radek!"

The hard eyes. The hard voice. Tony looked into the screen. "Yes, sir?"

"Radek, that woman is still downstairs in *Portal Waiting*! We can't have her hanging around all night. Why hasn't she been given her bill of divorcement and sent home? My God, man, where's your feelings? She's at least entitled to that."

"Right away, sir. I was just going."

He picked up the square of white paper. He pushed back his chair, got to his feet, went across the office taking those peculiar, quiet little steps of his.

Yes, sir. Just going, sir. On my way, sir. Because, sir, as you've pointed out so clearly, sir, she's at least entitled to that.

—DEAN EVANS

NEXT MONTH

★ Installment 2 of THE DEMOLISHED MAN by Alfred Bester, aglitter with brilliantly fresh ideas, situations, backgrounds and conflicts, pits its shrewd and resourceful criminal against — *a detective from whom nothing can be hidden!*

★ Science fiction much too seldom is emotionally moving, but CONDITIONALLY HUMAN by Walter M. Miller, Jr., presents a genuinely moving problem . . . yet without giving up an ingenious scientific premise and suspenseful action.

★ WHERE WERE WE? asks L. Sprague de Camp, in a scintillating article that excavates the predictions of science fiction from the past century to the present. How good were these predictions? The answer is surprising!

★ WHERE TO? queries Robert A. Heinlein, in a remorselessly logical article that shows how a modern writer, equipped with the tools of scientific extrapolation, can forecast the world of 2,000 A.D.

★ PLUS SHORT STORIES ★ FEATURES

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WORLD OF WONDER, edited by Fletcher Pratt. Twayne Publishers, New York, 1951. 445 *pages,* $3.95

OF the 19 tales Fletcher Pratt has selected for his first anthology of fantasy and science fiction, all but four rate B plus or better—an excellent score. The reason is not hard to find, either, since, according to the records of that nonpareil Index Master, Anthony Boucher, 9 out of the 19 have previously been anthologized.

The answer is simple: Mr. Pratt and his publishers are not specifically interested in the fan market.

It seems they are aiming at the collateral reading market in high school and college literary and composition courses. They should do well in this market, for the book is an exciting job for those who have not read the stories elsewhere.

On the other hand, it contains several never-before-reprinted masterpieces, too. Among them are Isaac Asimov's "The Red Queen's Race," Fredric Brown's "Etaoin Shrdlu," A. Bertram Chandler's "Giant Killer," Robert Heinlein's "They," Philip MacDonald's "Private — Keep Out," Judith Merril's "That Only a Mother," and two by H. Beam Piper, "He Walked Around the

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Horses" and "Operation RSVP." A distinguished list, though unco short.

Previously anthologized items: O. Henry's "Roads of Destiny," William Tenn's "Child's Play," Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," two of Kipling: "The Finest Story in the World" and "The Mark of the Beast," Sprague de Camp's "The Blue Giraffe," and Ray Bradbury's "The Million-Year Picnic."

The other tales, which you may like better than I, are: James Blish's "Mistake Inside," Gouverneur Morris's "Back There in the Grass," Esther Carlson's "Museum Piece," and Nelson Bond's "Conqueror's Isle." The Morris and the Bond have been previously anthologized, too.

Fletcher Pratt's introduction presents ideas about science fiction and fantasy in a way that makes most of us other anthologists sound like circus barkers. Best of all is his open recognition of the fact that top science fiction and fantasy are essentially intellectual—a medium for the expression of ideas which otherwise would be difficult, dreary, dull—or even somehow dangerous.

THE HOUSE OF MANY WORLDS, by Sam Merwin, Jr. Doubleday & Co., New York, 1951. 216 *pages,* $2.75

SAM Merwin, until recently editor of *Thrilling Wonder Stories and Startling Stories,* has turned out a rather disappointing first science fiction novel. The idea is fine, though unoriginal, but one feels that the author was in too much of a hurry to turn it into a polished story.

The House tells ingeniously of parallel worlds which touch at "tangential points" through which a group of people called "The Watchers" (*vide* John D. MacDonald's "Wine of the Dreamers," reviewed last month) supervise their various development lines.

The drama here revolves around a couple—male photographer, female poet-reporter (and a pretty silly character, too)—who are unwillingly drafted to become Watchers, and who "watch" on an odd alternate American Continent that has kerosene but no gasoline, rockets but no internal-combustion motors, invincible heat-ray guns but no airplanes, a depressed and under-developed North and an oligarchically imperial South.

The job of the Watchers is to prevent this southern government, with its capital in New Orleans, from disposing of a people's hero who is trying to bring science and technology to fruition. They succeed, of course. And at the very end there is a snapper in the tail that comes as all the greater a

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surprise for the excellently understated way in which it is put over.

If you can overlook the hasty writing and unfortunate characterizations, you'll find this an intriguing story.

THE SEA AROUND US, by Rachel L. Carson. Oxford University Press, New York, 1951. 250 *pages,* $3.50

THE best science fiction is sometimes defined as being nothing more than an extropolation of the known. In many—and in some of its best—parts, *The Sea* can according to this definition be called science fiction on the highest plane. It applies logical and scientific imagination to what we know or infer about the ocean depths and comes up with —sheer poetry.

What a book! Though plotless, it is rich with characters—dolphons, foraminifera, cephalopods, and those strange mammals, the whales, who never suffer caisson disease no matter how violent the change in the pressures against their bodies.

Probably you could call it adventureless, if you wished, yet it is crammed with two types of adventure—that of the struggles of the waters of the sea and of the creatures within them for continuity, place, primacy; and that more immediately fascinating sort undertaken by oceanographers and other marine scientists in search of difficult knowledge and sea-buried secrets. It is truly an *exciting* book.

EVERY BOY'S BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION, edited by Donald A. Wollheim. Frederick Fell, Inc., New York, 1951. 254 *pages,* $2.75

IT is difficult to understand why a book such as this is directed to boys. I know of no youngsters who would enjoy any of the ten (count 'em, TEN) stories in the volume, except Ray Bradbury's wonderful "King of the Gray Spaces," which is the only tale published since 1935 in the book.

The other nine are hoary chestnuts which men of around 45 to 55 will like—some of them—since it will give them a warm feeling of nostalgia for their youth, when they used to read stories like these and think them hot stuff.

The roster of authors alone give us of the older generation a clue to the quality of the stories: Ray Cummings, Bob Olsen, Daniel Dresser, Sewell Peaslee Wright, Edmond Hamilton, Clifford Simak, Jack Williamson, Clifton Kruse, and David H. Keller. None of the stories these comparative ancients have in the book are good; most of them are

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hopelessly awful, even those by writers such as Williamson and Simak, who are doing much better work today.

The tragedy is that many uninformed parents will give this volume to their kids as an introduction to science fiction. The works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, for all their age, would be a better primer.

ROCKETS, JETS, GUIDED MISSILES AND SPACE SHIPS, by Jack Coggins and Fletcher Pratt, Introduction by Willy Ley. Random House, New York, 1951. 60 *pages* 8 *by* 11 *inches,* $1.00

HERE, on the other hand, is definitely the best buy for boys in the last two or three years. It is a beautifully, densely illustrated summary, in simple, graphic language, of the origins, development, current status and probable future of the reaction principle as a source of flight power.

Every page has at least one, and often two or three, superbly real pictures by Jack Coggins, nearly 25 of them in full color. Many of them are semi-technical charts which do a brilliant job of showing what rocketry is actually about.

All for $1.00!

Fletcher Pratt has done a fine job of dramatic condensation in his text, telling the whole story by its high spots from the days of the Chinese invention of gunpowder through "What the Well-Dressed Spaceman Will Wear" and "Meteorites?" (they're no hazard to speak of).

There is not one suspicion of "writing down" in the whole book, either. Just what one needs for one's 9-to-90-year-old acquaintances who want to learn the ABCs of rocketry completely painlessly.

BULLARD OF THE SPACE PATROL, by Malcolm Jameson. Edited by Andre Norton. World Publishing Co., Cleveland & New York, 1951. 255 *pages,* $2.50

NICE to have these seven clean-cut and expert space operas by the late Malcolm Jameson between hard covers. The volume is published frankly as a juvenile, which is smart business sense, even though it is to be assumed that *Astounding Science Fiction* did not publish them as such originally.

Plenty of action, but action kept within human and possible range, all taking place in the Solar System. There are no BEMS, no faster-than-light travel, no Alien Intelligences: just men of the Space Patrol and their confreres and adversaries.

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Odd and complicated scientific devices abound; there is much manly competition between the crew of Bullard's *Pollux* and that of her sister ship the *Castor;* and enough—but not too much—of the weird and inexplicable take place in space and on the planets, moons and asteroids that are the natural and lawful prowling grounds of the Patrol.

The stories gain their charm and durability from the simplicity and directness with which they were conceived and written. There is no cheap melodrama.

Whether the average "sophisticated" adult will enjoy them, I don't know. I do, but then maybe I'm not quite adult yet. Certainly all youngsters with an ounce of adventurousness in their bones will go all-out for these swiftly moving and very real-seeming tales of tomorrow's adventures in space.

THE BLIND SPOT, by Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint. Prime Press, Philadelphia, 1951, 293 *pages,* $3.50

THIS is an astonishingly compelling and dramatic story—overwritten, it is true, and leaning a little heavily on the side of the pseudo-metaphysical, as so much fantasy did in the days when this book first was serialized (*Argosy-All-Story,* 1921). Nevertheless, it is a fascinating and in some ways curiously modern piece of genuine science fiction.

It may well be that *The Blind Spot* is the first of all "parallel world" stories of modern times—and let the experts correct me if they can!

The ingenious thesis of the book is that there are two parallel worlds, between which communication can be had only through the "spot" or locus, which our world calls "Blind" and the other world calls "The Spot of Life." And to each world, the other is "The Beyond" or "The World After Death" or "Heaven," in an entirely non-theological sense.

The complications and implications of this notion, circumstantially worked out in meticulous detail, make for an uncomfortably real story. It is one of its major triumphs that the novel seems wholly within the realm of fact while one is reading it—surely the acid tests of good science fantasy.

There is no point in even attempting to outline the plot and the denouement, since to try to retell them would be practically to write the book. Enough to say that only the most jaded and unimaginative of readers will be able to put this honored classic down unfinished.

It's good.

—GROFF CONKLIN

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Here's An Family PAYS $100.00

FOR A DAY, A WEEK, A MONTH, A YEAR, OR EVEN FOR LIFE...

Wonderful news! This new policy covers everyone from infancy to age 70—with cash benefits so surprising they should have instant appeal for you. Think of it! When sickness or accident sends you to the hospital, you will want this new Family Protection Plan. It PAYS $100.00 PER WEEK—for a day, a month, even a year, or longer—just as long, in fact, as it's necessary to stay in the hospital. What a relief to know that you and your family could have this PROTECTION so that precious savings may be safeguarded and thus avoid going into debt! The money is paid directly to you—it's YOURS to use and spend as you wish. No strings attached—the company pays you welcome cash when you need it most for as long as hospitalization continues—and you or any insured member of the family may return to the hospital for sickness or accident as many times in the year as necessary without paying one cent additional premium.

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In lieu of other regular benefits policy pays these benefits if polio strikes—
For Hospital Bills, up to.....$500.00
For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to.....$500.00
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JUST LOOK! The Large Benefit This Low Cost Policy Provides!

This remarkable Family Hospital Policy covers you and your family for about everything—for every kind of accident—and for all the common and rare diseases, and there are thousands of them, originating after the policy has been in force 30 days. Serious diseases that require hospitalization because of tuberculosis, cancer, heart disease, hernia, or diseases of the organs which are peculiar to women or sickness resulting in a surgical operation, Lumbago and Sacroiliac conditions are also covered if the cause originates six months after the effective date of the policy. Suicide, insanity, and venereal diseases are understandably excluded!

The money is all yours—for any purpose you want to use it. There are no hidden meanings or big words in this policy. You can understand the coverage this policy offers because it is written in big type in words that mean exactly what they say. This new Family Hospital Plan has been developed by a fine 28-year-old established company with assets of $13,188,604.16 to render a real and necessary service to the families of America. It is the kind of protection that will stand by you when emergency comes. We urge you and every family to send for this policy on our 10 day free trial—and be convinced that no other hospital plan offers so much for your $1.00 a month!

3¢ A DAY IS ALL YOU PAY

for this outstanding new Family Protection!

Sounds unbelievable—but it's true! NEW LOW COST for this wonderful family hospital protection is just 3¢ a day for each adult 18 to 59 and for ages 60 to 70 only 4½¢ a day. For children up to 18 years, the cost is only 1½¢ a day for each child! Naturally this policy is issued only to families and individuals now in good health—otherwise the cost would be sky high. But once protected by this policy, you are covered for hospitalization for about every sickness and accident. Back of this policy are the full resources of the nationally known Service Life Insurance Company of Omaha, Nebraska—organized under the laws of the State of Nebraska, with policyholders in every state, and with assets of $13,188,604.16 as of January 1, 1951.

SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE CO.

Hospital Department N-71 Omaha 2, Nebraska

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Entirely New Kind of HOSPITAL PLAN A WEEK DIRECT TO YOU

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This cash benefit actually takes care of most hospital room expense anywhere in the country . . . with probably money left over. Use the money this policy pays to help cover costly hospital room and board, surgeon's and doctor's bills, nursing care, hospital "extras", and what is left over will help pay you for the time lost from work or business. Members of your family from age 18 to 70 receive the cash benefit starting with the first day of confinement in the hospital. This remarkable new Family Hospital Plan covers children under 18 with cash benefits of $50.00 a week while in the hospital, for as long as they stay! Benefits paid to you when confined to any recognized hospital, except government hospitals, rest homes and sanitariums, clinics, health resorts or spas. You pick your own doctor. Your good health—and the health of your family—is your most priceless possession. But it's plain common sense to be prepared should misfortune strike.

Examine this Policy Without Cost or Obligation—
Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

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Service Life Insurance Company invites you to inspect this brand new kind of Family Hospital Plan. We will send the actual policy to you for 10 days free examination. Talk it over with your banker, doctor, lawyer or spiritual adviser. Compare this policy with any other. Then—and only then—make up your mind. SEND NO MONEY—just your name and address on the coupon. Mail today—learn about this protection now!

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Money melts away fast when you or a member of your family has to go to the hospital. You have to pay costly hospital board and room . . . doctor's bills *and maybe the surgeon's bill too* . . . necessary medicines, operating room fees—a thousand and one things you don't count on in advance. Ready cash and savings go in a hurry—another way *of saying what a Godsend this* READY CASH BENEFIT WILL BE TO YOU. Here's cash to go a long way toward paying heavy hospital expenses—and the money left over can help pay for *time lost from your job or business.* Remember—all cash benefits are paid directly to you—and never to a doctor or hospital unless you so direct. This means you can use the money to your *own best advantage.*

THIS POLICY SOLD BY MAIL

There's a big advantage to buying this policy by mail. This method of selling by mail is less costly for us—and that's another reason why we can offer so much protection to you for so little money.

MAIL COUPON

The Actual Policy Will Come to You at Once Without Cost or Obligation

SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY

Hospital Department **N-71** Omaha 2, Nebraska

The Service Life Insurance Company
Hospital Department N-71 Omaha 2, Nebraska

Please rush the new Family Hospital Protection Plan Policy to me on 10 days Free Inspection. I understand that I am under no obligation.

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*Address*_____

*City or Town*_____ *State*_____

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The Addicts

By
WILLIAM
MORRISON

Illustrated by
ED. ALEXANDER

Wives always try to cure husbands of bad habits, even on lonely asteroids!

YOU must understand that Palmer loved his wife as much as ever, or he would never have thought of his simple little scheme at all. It was entirely for her own good, as he had told himself a dozen times in the past day. And with that he stilled whatever qualms of conscience he might otherwise have had. He didn't think of himself as being something of a murderer.

She was sitting at the artificial fireplace, a cheerful relic of ancient days, reading just as peacefully as if she had been back home on Mars, instead of on this desolate outpost of space. She had adjusted quickly to the loneliness and the strangeness of this

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life—to the absence of friends, the need for conserving air, the strange feeling of an artificial gravity that varied slightly at the whim of impurities in the station fuel. To everything, in fact, but her husband.

She seemed to sense his eyes on her, for she looked up and smiled. "Feeling all right, dear?" she asked.

"Naturally. How about you?"

"As well as can be expected."

"Not very good, then."

She didn't reply, and he thought, *She hates to admit it, but she really envies me. Well, I'll fix it so that she needn't any more.* And he stared through the thick, transparent metal window at the beauty of the stars, their light undimmed by dust or atmosphere.

The stories told about the wretchedness of the lighthouse keepers who lived on asteroids didn't apply at all to this particular bit of cosmic rock. Life here had been wonderful, incredibly satisfying. At least it had been that way for him. And now it would be the same way for his wife as well.

He would have denied it hotly if you had accused him of finding her repulsive. But to certain drunks, the sober man or woman is an offense, and Palmer was much more than a drunk. He was a marak addict, and in the eyes of the marak fiends, all things and all people were wonderful, except those who did not share their taste for the drug. The latter were miserable, depraved creatures, practically subhuman.

Of course that was not the way most of them put it. Certainly it was not the way Palmer did. He regarded his wife, he told himself, as an unfortunate individual whom he loved very much, one whom it was his duty to make happy. That her new-found happiness would also hasten her death was merely an unfortunate coincidence. She was sure to die anyway, before long, so why not have her live out her last days in the peace and contentment that only marak could bring?

Louise herself would have had an answer to that, if he had ever put the question to her. He was careful never to do so.

She laid the book aside and looked up at him again. She said, "Jim, darling, do you think you could get the television set working again?"

"Not without a mesotron rectifier."

"Even the radio would be a comfort."

"It wouldn't do any good, anyway. Too much static from both Mars and Earth this time of year."

That was the beauty of the marak, he thought. It changed his

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mood, and left him calm and in full command of his faculties, able to handle any problem that came up. He himself, of course, missed neither the radio nor the television, and he never touched the fine library of micro-books. He didn't need them.

A shadow flitted by outside the thick window, blotting out for a moment the blaze of stars. It was the shadow of death, as he knew, and he was able to smile even at that. Even death was wonderful. When it finally came, it would find him happy. He would not shudder away from it, as he saw Louise doing now at the sight of the ominous shadow.

He smiled at his wife again, remembering the six years they had lived together. It had been a short married life, but—again the word suggested itself to him—a wonderful one. There had been only one quarrel of importance, in the second year, and after that they had got along perfectly. And then, two years ago, he had begun to take marak, and after that he couldn't have quarreled with anyone. It was a paragon among drugs, and it was one of the mysteries of his existence that anybody should object to his using it.

Louise had tried to argue with him after she had found out, but he had turned every exchange of views into a peaceful discussion, which from his side, at least, was brimming over with good humor. He had even been good-humored when she tried to slip the antidote into his food. It was this attitude of his that had so often left her baffled and enraged, and he had a good chuckle out of that, too. Imagine a wife getting angry because her husband was too good-natured.

But she was never going to get angry again. He would see to that. Not after tonight. A big change was going to take place in her life.

She had picked up another book, and for the moment he pitied her. He knew that she wasn't interested in any books. She was merely restless, looking for something to do with herself, seeking some method of killing time before the shadows outside killed it for her for good and all. She couldn't understand his being so peaceful and contented, doing nothing at all.

She threw the second book down and snarled—yes, that was the word, "You're such a fool, Jim! You sit there, smug and sure of yourself, your mind blank, just waiting—waiting for them to kill you and me. And you seem actually happy when I mention it."

"I'm happy at anything and everything, dear."

"At the thought of dying too?"

"Living or dying—it doesn't make any difference. Whatever

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happens, I'm incapable of being unhappy."

"If it weren't for the drug, we'd both live. You'd think of a way to kill them before they killed us."

"There is no way."

"There must be. You just can't think of it while the drug has you in its grip."

"The drug doesn't have you, dear." He asked without sarcasm, "Why don't you think of a way?"

"Because I lack the training you have. Because I don't have the scientific knowledge, and all the equipment scattered around means nothing to me."

"There's nothing to be done."

Her fists clenched. "If you weren't under the influence of the drug—"

"You know that it doesn't affect the ability to think. Tests have shown that."

"Tests conducted by addicts themselves!"

"The fact that they can conduct the tests should be proof enough that there's nothing wrong with their minds."

"But there *is!*" she shouted. "I can see it in you. Oh, I know that you can still add and subtract, and you can draw lines under two words which mean the same thing, but that isn't really thinking. Real thinking means the ability to tackle real problems—hard problems that you can't handle merely with paper and pencil. It means having the incentive to use your brain for a long time at a stretch. And that's what the drug has ruined. It has taken away all your incentive."

"I still go about my duties."

"Not as well as you used to, and even at that, only because they've become a habit. Just as you talk to me, because I've become a habit. If you'd let me give you the antidote—"

He chuckled at the absurdity of her suggestion. Once an addict had been cured, he could not become addicted again. The antidote acted to produce a permanent immunization against the effects of the drug. It was the realization of this fact that made addicts fight so hard against any attempt to cure them. And she thought that she could convince him by argument!

He said, "*You* talk of not being able to think!"

"I know," she replied hotly. "*I'm* the one who blunders. *I'm* the fool, for arguing with you, when I realize that it's impossible to convince a marak addict."

"That's it," he nodded, and chuckled again. But that wasn't quite it. For he was also chuckling at his plan. She had thought him unable to tackle a real problem. Well, he would tackle one tonight. Then she would simply adopt his point of view, and she

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would no longer be unhappy. After she had accepted the solution he had provided, she would wonder how she could ever have opposed him.

He fell into one of his dozes and hardly noticed her glaring at him. When he came out of it at last, it was to hear her say, "We have to stay alive as long as possible. For the sake of the lighthouse."

"Of course, my dear. I don't dispute that at all."

"And the longer we stay alive, the more chance there is that some ship will pick us up."

"Oh, no, there's no chance at all," he asserted cheerfully. "You know that as well as I do. No use deceiving yourself, my love."

That, he observed to himself, was the way of non-addicts. They couldn't look facts in the face. They had to cling to a blind and silly optimism which no facts justified.

He knew that there was no hope. *He* was able to review the facts calmly, judiciously, to see the inevitability of their dying—and to take pleasure even in that.

He reviewed them for her now. "Let us see, sweetheart, whether I've lost my ability to analyze a situation. We're here with our pretty little lighthouse in the middle of a group of asteroids between Mars and Earth. Ships have been wrecked here, and our task is to prevent further wrecks. The lighthouse sends out a standard high-frequency beam whose intensity and phase permit astrogators to estimate their distance and direction from us. Ordinarily, there's nothing for us to do. But on the rare occasions when the beam fails—"

"That will be the end."

"On those occasions," he continued, unruffled by her interruption, "I am supposed to leave my cosy little shelter, so thoughtfully equipped with all the comforts of Earth or Mars, and make repairs as rapidly as possible. Under the usual conditions, lighthousekeeping is a boring task. In fact, it has been known to drive people insane. That's why it's generally assigned to happily married couples like us, who are accustomed to living quietly, without excitement."

"And that," she added bitterly, "is why even happily married couples are usually relieved after one year."

"But, darling," he said, his tone cheerful, "you mustn't blame anyone. Who would have expected that a maverick meteor would come at us and displace us from our orbit? And who would have expected that the meteor would have collided first with the outer asteroids, and picked up a cargo of—those?"

He gestured toward the window, where a shadow had mo-

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mentarily paused. By the light that shone through, he could see that the creature was relatively harmless-looking. It had what appeared to be a round, humorous face whose unhumorous intentions would be revealed only at the moment of the kill. The seeming face was actually featureless, for it was not a face at all. It had neither eyes, nor nose, nor mouth. The effect of features was given by the odd blend of colors. Almost escaping notice because of their unusual position and their dull brown hue were the stomach fangs, in neat rows which could be extended and retracted like those of a snake.

He noticed that Louise had shuddered again, and said, in the manner of a man making conversation, "Interesting, aren't they? They're rock breathers; you know. They need very little oxygen, and they extract that from the silicates and other oxygen-containing compounds of the rock."

"Don't talk about them."

"All right, if you don't want me to. But about us—you see, my dear, no one expected us to be lost. And even if the Lighthouse Service has started to look for us, it'll take a long time to find us."

"We have food, water, air. If not for those beasts, we'd last until a rescue ship appeared."

"But even a rescue ship wouldn't be able to reach us unless we kept the beam going. So far, we've been lucky. It's really functioned remarkably well. But sooner or later it'll go out of order, and then I'll have to go out and fix it. You agree to that, don't you, Louise, dear?"

She nodded. She said quietly, "The beam must be kept in order."

"That's when the creatures will get me," he said, almost with satisfaction. "I may kill one or two of them, although the way I feel toward everything, I hate to kill anything at all. But you know, sweetheart, that there are more than a dozen of them altogether, and it's clumsy shooting in a spacesuit at beasts which move as swiftly as they do."

"And if you don't succeed in fixing what's wrong, if they get you—" She broke down suddenly and began to cry.

He looked at her with compassion and smoothed her hair. And yet, under the influence of the drug, he enjoyed even her crying. It was, as he never tired of repeating to himself and to her, a wonderful drug. Under its spell, a man — or a woman — could really enjoy life.

Tonight she would begin to enjoy life along with him.

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THEIR chronometer functioned perfectly, and they still regulated their living habits by it, using Greenwich Earth time. At seven in the evening they sat down to a fine meal. Knowing that tomorrow they might die, Louise had decided that tonight they would eat and drink as well as they could, and she had selected a Christmas special. She had merely to pull a lever, and the food had slid into the oven, to be cooked at once by an intense beam of high-frequency radiation. Jim himself had chosen the wine and the brandy—one of the peculiarities of the marak was that it did not affect the actual enjoyment of alcoholic drinks in the slightest, and one of the sights of the Solar System was to see an addict who was also drunk.

But it was a rare sight, for the marak itself created such a pervading sensation of well-being that it often acted as a cure for alcoholism. Once an alcoholic had experienced its effect, he had no need to get drunk to forget his troubles. He enjoyed his troubles instead, and drank the alcohol for its own sake, for its ability to provide a slightly different sensation, and not for its ability to release him from an unhappy world.

So tonight Palmer drank moderately, taking just enough, as it seemed to him, to stimulate his brain. And he did what he now realized he should have done long ago. Unobserved, he placed a tablet of marak in his own wineglass and one in Louise's. The slight bitterness of taste would be hardly perceptible. And after that Louise would be an addict too.

That was the way the marak worked. There was nothing mysterious about the craving. It was simply that once you had experienced how delightful it was, you wouldn't do without it.

The tablet he had taken that morning was losing its effect, but he felt so pleased at what he was doing that he didn't mind even that. For the next half hour he would enjoy himself simply by looking at Louise, and thinking that now at last they would be united again, no longer kept apart by her silly ideas about doing something to save themselves. And then the drug would take effect, and they would feel themselves lifted to the stars together, never to come down to this substitute for Earth again until the beam failed, and they went out together to make the repairs, and the shadows closed in on them.

He had made sure that Louise had her back to him when he dropped the tablet into her glass, and he saw that she suspected nothing. She drank her wine, he

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noticed; without even commenting on the taste. He felt a sudden impulse to kiss her, and, somewhat to her surprise, he did so. Then he sat down again and went on with the dinner.

He waited.

An hour later he knew that he had made her happy. She was laughing as she hadn't laughed for a long time. She laughed at the humorous things he said, at the flattering way he raised his glass to her, even at what she saw through the window. Sometimes it seemed to him that she was laughing at nothing at all.

He tried to think of how he had reacted the first time he had taken the drug. He hadn't been quite so aggressively cheerful, not quite so—hysterical. But then, the drug didn't have exactly the same effect on everyone. She wasn't as well balanced as he had been. The important thing was that she was happy.

Curiously enough, he himself wasn't happy at all.

It took about five seconds for the thought to become clear to him, five seconds in which he passed from dull amazement to an enraged and horrified comprehension. He sprang to his feet, overturning the table at which they still sat. And he saw that she wasn't surprised at all. that she still stared at him with a secret satisfaction.

"You've cured me!" he cried. "You've fed me the antidote!"

And he began to curse. He remembered the other time she had tried it, the time when he had been on the alert, and had easily detected the strange metallic taste of the stuff. He had spat it out, and under the influence of the drug from which she had hoped to save him, he had laughed at her.

Now he was unable to laugh. He had been so intent on feeding the tablet to her that he had forgotten to guard himself, and he had been caught. He was normal now—her idea of being normal—and he would never again know the wonderful feeling the drug gave. He began to realize his situation on this horrible lonely asteroid. He cast a glance at the window and at what must be waiting outside, and it was his turn to shudder.

He noticed that she was still smiling.

He said bitterly, "You're the addict now and I'm cured."

She stopped smiling and said quietly, "Jim, listen to me. You're wrong, completely wrong. I didn't give you the antidote, and you didn't give me the drug."

"I put it in your wine-glass myself."

She shook her head. "That was a tablet I substituted for yours. It's an anti-virus dose from our

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medicine chest. You took one of the same things. That's why you feel so depressed. You're not under the influence of the drug any more."

He took a deep breath. "But I'm not cured?"

"No. I knew that I wouldn't be able to slip you the antidote. The taste is too strong. Later you'll be able to start taking the drug again. That is, if you want to, after experiencing for a time what it is to be normal. But not now. You have to keep your head clear. You have to think of something to save us."

"But there's nothing to think of!" he shouted angrily. "I told you that the drug doesn't affect the intelligence!"

"I still don't believe you. If you'd only exert yourself, use your mind—"

He said savagely, "I'm not going to bother. Give me those marak tablets."

She backed away from him. "I thought you might want them. I took no chances. I threw them out."

"Out there?" A horrified and incredulous look was on his face. "You mean that I'm stuck here without them? Louise, you fool, there's no help for us! The other way, at least, we'd have died happy. But now—"

He stared out the window. The shadows were there in full force. Not one now, but two, three—he counted half a dozen. It was almost as if they knew that the end had come.

They had reason to be happy, he thought with despair. And perhaps—he shrank back from the thought, but it forced itself into his mind—perhaps, now that all happiness had gone, and wretchedness had taken its place, he might as well end everything. There would be no days to spend torturing himself in anticipation of a horrible death.

Louise exclaimed suddenly, "Jim, *look!* They're *frolicking!*"

He looked. The beasts certainly were gay. One of them leaped from the airless surface of the asteroid and sailed over its fellow. He had never seen them do that before. Usually they clung to the rocky surface. Another was spinning around oddly, as if it had lost its sense of balance.

Louise said, "*They've* swallowed the tablets! Over a hundred doses—enough to drug every beast on the asteroid!"

For a moment Palmer stared at the gamboling alien drug addicts. Then he put on his spacesuit and took his gun, and, without the slightest danger to himself, went out and shot them one by one. He noted, with a kind of grim envy, that they died happy.

—WILLIAM MORRISON

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HALLUCINATION

The one thing wrong with

is not the solitude. In

ORD sat in his swivel chair and surveyed the Solar System. The clarity of vision, unimpeded by the two-hundred-mile curtain of Earth's atmosphere, was such that, from his position in Pluto's orbit, he could see with the naked eye every one of the planets except Pluto itself, hiding in a cluster of bright stars, and Mercury, eclipsed at the moment by the Sun.

But, then, Ord knew exactly

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ORBIT

By J. T. M'INTOSH

being alone on a space station

fact, it's exactly the opposite!

Illustrated by SIBLEY

where to look. Every day, for over two thousand days, he had looked out on the Solar System. He had seen Mercury scuttle round the Sun twenty-five times; Venus, more sedately, nine; Earth had made six of the familiar trips through space that meant years; Mars was on its fourth journey; but Jupiter wasn't more than halfway around yet.

"It helps, I suppose, to be able to see them," said a light, whimsical voice behind him. Even

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when Una said the most serious things, which was often, her voice laughed. "If you hadn't been able to see the planets, you'd have been a straitjacket case long ago."

"Who knows I'm not one now?" Ord asked. "You don't, anyway."

He didn't turn yet. He postponed the moment when he would, dragging it out almost ecstatically from second to second—like a heavy smoker halting, pausing deliberately in anticipation, cigarette in mouth, before lighting it.

"I think," she retorted, the laughter in her voice as ever, "that so long as you talk sanely about madness, you can't be so far gone."

The moment came. He couldn't wait forever. He swung around and looked at her with a slow, ironical smile. He had known more beautiful women, but none, perhaps, who knew their limitations as well as she did.

Una always wore that spotless white shirt, open-necked and tucked tightly into the waistband of her sharply creased bottle-green slacks. Perhaps it was pessimistic to think the worst of what one didn't know, but Ord took it for granted that Una's only good points of figure were the neat waist and upper half and the length of leg that her customary outfit displayed.

There was a slight irregularity about her forehead which she treated adroitly by always having a cascade of her beautiful ash-blonde hair over one side of her face. Her teeth were splendid in a subtle half-smile; she never allowed herself more. There was just a hint at the top button of her chaste, impeccable shirt that her skin wasn't all of a uniform satin smoothness, but suspicion was never allowed to grow to certainty.

"HOW long now, Colin?" Una asked. "I don't watch time as you do. Where could they be, if they started whenever the beam failed?"

"I haven't worked it out since you asked the last time." He couldn't still the tremor in his voice. "But they could be very close."

There was a hint of regret in her nod.

Ord looked past her at the blank wall opposite the observation windows. He wasn't cramped.

The space station three billion six hundred million miles from the Sun was designed for one man who would always be alone, who would spend two years in his own company for the somewhat fabulous salary of a space station officer, and everything had been done to make the quarters seem roomy and comfortable without giving a chilling impression of

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emptiness. There was the observatory, the machine room, the lounge, the workshop, the bedroom, the bathroom, the storerooms, even a spare room into which Una disappeared, though it had not been provided for Una or anyone like her.

As Ord looked at the blank wall, he was thinking of the activity on Earth, six years before, when one of the three Pluto directional radio beams had failed. There were plenty of beams left to guide ships through space, but the sudden failure of Station Two's beam must have had some effect on almost every interplanetary trip. Five minutes on the Moon trip, at certain times; two or three days on journeys to Mars or Venus, depending on the relative positions of the starting point, destination, and the two remaining Pluto beams; weeks, even months more required for the run to some of the asteroids and the satellites of the outer planets.

Two spokes of the directional wheel remained, but that left a great gaping angle of a hundred and twenty degrees, served only feebly by the beams from ships' destinations, with no powerful universal beam to reinforce them.

The situation was not new. Some day there would be so many line-of-flight beams in the Solar System that ships wouldn't have to know the beams they were on. They would merely point their noses where they wanted to go and cast off, like so many galleons sailing before the wind. But as yet there was not enough interplanetary travel to make the duplication of beams practicable.

If a beam failed, it failed, and more than six years had to pass before it could be put in operation again, unless the failure occurred at a convenient time — when a ship was well on the way to relieve a station officer and check the equipment, say. Through history, however, failure of anything man-made had tended to come almost always at the most inconvenient times.

Ord followed the ship in his mind through its six-year journey. A week to prepare. Two days to reach the Moon. Three weeks for the run to Mars, which would have been sixteen days if Station Two had been sending out its beam. Then trouble. Only the little Ganymede beam, in the positions of the planets and their satellites at the time, to help the repair ship on its way from Mars. Almost nine months to Jupiter. But at least, by that time, the ship would have some velocity to help the rockets on the remaining three billion two hundred million miles . . . and the long, dreary search for the silent speck in

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space that was the space station.

Eleven months altogether, with the beam; over six years without it.

One thing that helped Ord bear the extra five years of solitude he had to spend aboard the station, thousands of millions of miles from the nearest man, was the thought of the accumulated pay he would collect. The station officers were necessary, and the various space lines had to accept responsibility for them.

He would be set up for life, at twenty-nine, when he got back to Earth at last.

UNA shrugged. "Oh, well, it's been nice knowing you. And I mean that."

"It would be for you, Una. But that was because of the others before you. I learned a lot."

"You've just broken rule one," she said lightly. "Never talk of 'the others.' Just be careful you don't break rule two."

"What rule is that?"

"You should know. You want me to break it? Most particularly, never talk of any others to come."

She made a gesture of dismissal, as if she were tearing the whole subject out of a notebook, crumpling it and throwing it away.

"Shall we play chess?" she asked lightly. "It's a long time since we did."

"All right. But not here. Let's go into the lounge."

He led the way through the station as if she didn't know it as well as he did. He set up the pieces rapidly, through long practice. Una didn't sit down opposite him, but poised on the edge of the sofa. She always kept her long, graceful line intact.

They had just made the first oblique reference to something which had been growing for a long time. Undoubtedly Ord was growing tired of Una. It was nobody's fault, or his, in so far as it was anyone's. There was a hint of farewell in the chess game. One for the road, so to speak.

Una played quickly and decisively. One particularly rapid move brought the usual complaint from Ord.

"I wish you'd pay more attention," he protested. "If you win, I look silly, taking so much time to think things out. And if I win, you lose nothing because you obviously weren't trying."

Una laughed. "It's just a game," she answered.

She won the first game. "Luck," Ord grunted, without heat. "You never saw the danger of that rook to bishop's fourth."

"Perhaps not. But look how well I followed it up, so it really doesn't matter, does it?"

They played the inevitable second game, and inevitably, also,

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Ord won it. Like all chess players who have won a game they knew they could win when and how they wished, he felt relaxed and pleased with himself.

He yawned.

Una rose. "I can take a hint," she said.

"No, please . . ."

She smiled at him and disappeared into her room.

Ord spent a long time looking at the blank door. He had been warned against solitosis (Latin *solitarius,* from *solus,* and the Greek *-osis*), but for him it wasn't so bad. He still knew the truth; perhaps that was it. After all this time, he was still in no danger of really believing what was not so. For example . . .

—

HE got up and went through to the machine room. Among other things, this room presented a complete picture of conditions throughout the entire station from moment to moment. He could sit before the dials and switches and meters and check on everything from the outside temperature to the air pressure in the farthest storeroom.

He could see quite plainly, for example, that the temperature in Una's room, as of that moment, was minus 110 degrees Centigrade. A long way above absolute zero, certainly—but a long way below comfortable bedroom temperature. Moreover, the air pressure was only eight pounds.

In a word, though he had seen Una enter the room, he might see her come out of it again. But Una wasn't there. The door had never been open.

There was no Una.

Knowing that fact was a big factor. Long ago, he had feared a time when he wouldn't know such things. He still feared it now and then.

Yet if he pressurized the spare room, raised its temperature and then walked in, he would see Una asleep in the bed. If he touched her, she would be real. If he slapped her face with his hand, his palm would sting, and she would awaken, resentful. If he stabbed her, she would die, and he would have to take the trouble of burying her out in space.

That was all real—to him.

But he could see and appreciate the facts indicated by the dials. Even though he was tired of Una, however, he could not merely tell her to vanish and she would be gone. He had had to provide a ship to bring her here, and he would have to provide another to take her away.

Solitosis was no new thing; it had been discovered soon after space flight. Unfortunately, no one had so far discovered what to do about it, except remove the conditions that produced it. Space

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is not merely a void; it's emptier than that—empty of horizon, sky, soft sunlight, ground and greenery and buildings, empty of time and continuity of one's history, either as an individual or member of the human race. Worst of all, it's empty of people. A hermit may deliberately escape civilization, but leave him alone on a deserted world and he turns psychotic. That, in short, is solitosis.

There was a reason for the fact that there was a space station officer—he could handle the maintenance of the station—and a reason for the fact that there was only one: Two men together were not enough to protect each other from solitosis. The critical number was about forty. But to leave forty men on a space station was uneconomic. To leave fewer, yet more than one, was dangerous to all, for solitosis could be homicidal.

The natural solution was to leave one man, who would naturally become a solitosis victim, but generally didn't harm himself and could be restored to complete sanity when he was relieved—simply by returning him to Earth.

It was simple. It worked. Of course, station officers had to be paid to take two years of insanity. It was rarely completely pleasant or completely unpleasant. The result took different forms, but always there were pleasures and pains.

No station officer was ever in a position to know what he was in for before he signed on, for no man was allowed to subject himself to solitosis twice.

But Ord was more interested in the problem of Una. He knew, of course, that he wouldn't work any solution out and do something about it. His particular brand of solitosis didn't work like that. Certainly, somewhere in his mind, a decision was being reached. But what that was was hidden from him. He had to wait and see what happened. But being tired of Una, he knew the general lines.

PUTTING on his suit, Ord went outside. Fifty years before, scores of ships had come in on the beam from the station, which had been held on its course by six freighters. Each ship in the fleet had dragged or pushed a lump of rock that nobody wanted, for the station, when complete, had to have mass. Gradually, a planet was built—a very small planet, but enough to form a base for the station and enable it to follow Pluto in its orbit with a minimum expenditure of power. The station on Pluto itself was already in operation, and Station Three was be-

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ing set up concurrently.

Bouncing gently over the rocks of the dark, airless world that was only big enough to hold a small ship to its surface, Ord paused at the tiny cruiser Una had used. It was as real as she was, no more, no less. He forgot the details of the story that explained Una's arrival. It was so completely preposterous that any girl should arrive alone at any space station, in any kind of ship, that he hadn't bothered to think up a convincing explanation. Una, like the others, just appeared. She had had a story which she was prepared to tell, but he had cut it short. That was most satisfactory all around.

The ship, he saw, was not obviously damaged. He jumped up on the hull experimentally. He thought that he landed on it and stood twelve feet above the surface of the planet.

He searched hazily for an explanation. Perhaps he had picked a spur of rock and made it the ship. Perhaps his eyes manufactured twelve feet of height. He had never inspected the ship closely, and he didn't now; it would only demand a lot of tiring mental effort. He wouldn't know consciously that he was constructing everything he saw, but that was what he would be doing.

He bounced back to the station and into the airless machine room to examine the beam equipment once more. There was nothing seriously wrong with it. He could repair it in a few hours if he had the tools and six hands, which was more than most space station officers could say.

That was the difficulty about a job like Ord's—station officers had to be experienced. But how could they be experienced when they could never have done the job before?

He cast a last glance around the machine room and left.

Ord did think of going back to Una's ship, finding something wrong and repairing it, so that it would be possible for her to go. But that would be humoring his solitosis. He still preferred to be as sane as possible.

He had involuntarily produced men as companions once, but it hadn't worked. He could never become sufficiently interested in their physical appearance to make them real. He might talk with them and enjoy talking, but they were always ghosts and looked it. The women had never been ghosts.

In fact, he had been afraid, once, that the time would come when he would actually believe in them. And, of course, he had often explored the possibility that when someone *actually* came, he would think it was part of an-

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other hallucination. But there seemed little reason to fear that while it was still so easy to prove to himself that he was alone at the station.

He took off his suit and washed and shaved carefully, having decided, long since, that the normal habits of human existence should be carefully preserved. He dressed neatly, though the station was warm and there was no real need for clothes, and, when he slept, he wore pajamas.

There had been a time — the time of Suzy and Margo—when the apparent life at the station was what might have been expected of a solitary man. But he discovered, quite plainly and simply, that there were too many complications. Una had perhaps been too much of a swing in the other direction. His relations with her, Ord thought wryly, wouldn't have been out of place in a Victorian book for boys and girls, except that he didn't mind her smoking.

HE slept for twelve hours. Once he wakened, half convinced he had heard something, but he was sleepy, didn't want to move, and had no intention of pandering to his own neurosis.

It was not until he had been up for hours that he began to wonder why Una didn't appear. Perhaps she was ill. Perhaps, though he didn't think of it that way, he had decided unconsciously to have her die on him, lingeringly and effectively.

He sighed, went to the machine room and brought the temperature and air pressure of Una's room to normal. Then he went in.

She was gone, but her perfume lingered in the air. He went to the observation room and looked for her ship. It was gone, too.

He was a little disgusted, but he didn't blame himself. It was easier and more satisfactory to blame Una. She might at least have said good-by. All in all, he had liked her. He would have liked to meet the real Una, if there was one somewhere. He had tired of her chiefly because she had never become a genuine, credible character. She had always been true to type, whereas real people weren't.

He stayed in the observatory and looked for a ship. He smiled at the thought that what he believed to be a ship, bringing another girl with another fantastic story of being lost in space, might turn out to be the relief ship.

He was glad his solitosis had not taken the form that Benson's had. Benson had lost all sense of time. He had spent millions of subjective years waiting for the relief ship, though Benson only had to wait the regulation two years. Benson hadn't minded

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much. He thought he had turned into a mental giant. As it turned out, his functioning IQ had really gone up some fifteen points. It came down again eleven points, but certainly Benson had no reason to regret his two years of solitude. Nevertheless, Ord was glad it hadn't taken him the same way.

As he expected, the ship was there, curving in for a landing. It wasn't the relief ship, since it was too small. It was, in fact, far too small to be capable of the trip from Earth with no beam to assist it.

Ord was on the merry-go-round again. If he hadn't done a good job on the last hours of Una, he had made up for it with the first few hours of whoever it was. The little ship overshot, handled exactly as women often handled spacecraft. It took a long, five-hour sweep that had Ord biting his nails. Moreover, it wasn't a rocket ship at all. Perhaps this time the girl—naturally, it would be a girl—had an explanation for the impossible to beat all explanations. She was certainly keeping him in suspense.

But at last the ship was down, and Ord, already in his spacesuit, hurried out to it. A figure emerged as he reached it, and through the faceplate he saw a face which was clear from the start.

The girl gestured toward the ship, uselessly. He indicated the space station. She shook her head inside the huge helmet, pointing to the ship. He was puzzled. This was new.

Suddenly, to indicate her meaning, she bent down and lifted the end of the ship, then looked up at him. He understood at last. She was afraid it wasn't safe to leave the ship there. She thought it might blow away.

He laughed and tried to reassure her without words. It was true enough that even a light breeze might be enough to break the feeble attraction of the planet for the ship. But on a tiny man-made world, with no atmosphere, that was no problem. He demonstrated, getting below the ship and heaving. It sailed up slowly, and for a moment Ord almost shared the girl's fear that it would never return. But then gravity caught it and the ship returned gently. It was clear that it would take considerable force to break the hold of the small world on it.

The girl turned from it, ready to go with Ord to the space station.

ORD shut the airlock and began to divest himself of his suit. The girl, however, still wasn't satisfied. She looked about for meters to assure herself that the pressure was sufficient. Gravely, Ord pointed them out. Then she

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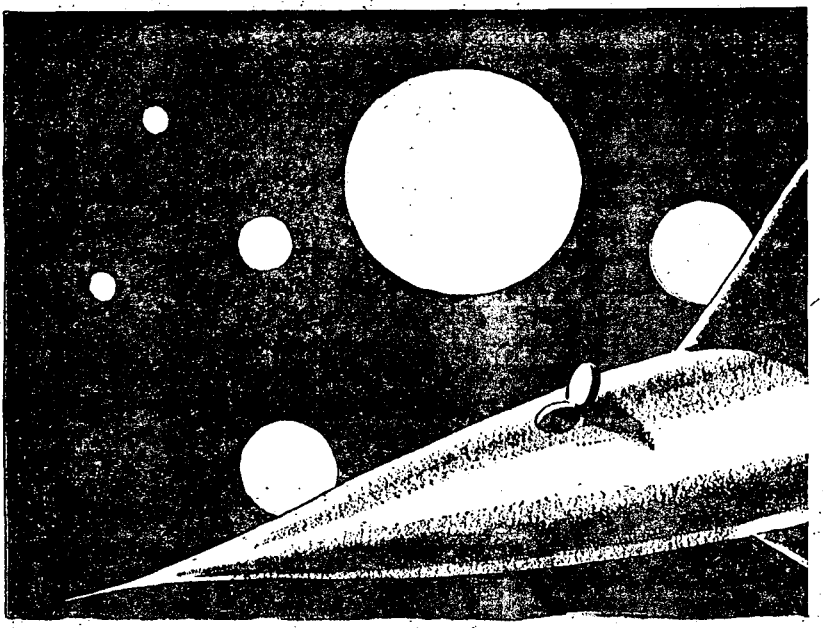

opened her helmet and took a slow, cautious breath.

"You must be Baker," she said.

That was another shock. Baker was the previous station officer, and Ord had all but forgotten his name—actually, until she mentioned it, the name had been forgotten. For a moment, Ord wondered wildly if the girl was one of Baker's dreams, seven years late. But Baker's solitosis hadn't taken that form.

"No, Ord," he said. "Colin Ord."

"Before we go any further," she said, "just how does solitosis affect you?"

This, too, was new.

"Just makes me see things that aren't there," replied Ord cautiously.

"And you know there's nothing there?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you know I'm here?"

Ord grinned. "I'm not even wondering about it."

Suddenly the girl was holding a gun pointed at him.

"One thing you can be sure of," she told him. "This gun is here. I don't want to be unpleasant, but I think we should remove misunderstandings. I'm not God's little gift to lonely space station

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officers, and any time you do anything that indicates you think I am, this comes out and it may do some damage. That clear?"

"Very. I told you my name. What's yours?"

"Elsa Catterline. You want to know why I'm here, of course."

"Not particularly."

She looked up warily at that. But she went on lifting off her helmet and removing her spacesuit. Ord made no move to help

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her. There was always the possibility that it might really be dangerous.

"I'll tell you all the same," she continued. "I killed a man—why and how doesn't matter. I had access to an experimental ship. That one out there. I thought if I disappeared for about two years . . . "

"Don't labor over it," said Ord. "I'm not asking questions."

"I know. I wonder why."

She won her battle with the suit and emerged. Ord's eyes widened. She was beautiful, really beautiful, but he had expected that. The unexpected thing was that she wore the kind of outfit girls in magazine stories wore in similar circumstances—white nylon shorts and what might have been called the minimum bra.

Once there would have been nothing surprising in that, but for years he had been very careful and restrained. He had tried sex undiluted, and then had gone back to diluting it in self-protection. It was a long time since any of his girls had been so feminine and made it so obvious.

In fact, for the first time, he seriously considered the possibility that she was real. Real people were sometimes more fantastic than the wildest imaginings.

"I wonder," he said.

"Don't," she snapped.

"I was only thinking," he went

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on easily, "that you're going to have a tough time with that gun when you get tired of holding it. It's a heavy gun. Want me to get a gunbelt for you?"

She flushed angrily. She looked the kind of sweet-natured kid who could kill a man, at that. Her nose and eyes and mouth were exactly where she would have placed them herself for the best effect, if she could have done so, and everything about her was compact and perfect and made for efficiency. Not efficiency in handling a spaceship or even a gun, but efficiency in always getting what she wanted. Another thing to add to Ord's growing list of points of interest about Elsa Catterline was that she wasn't the kind of girl he would normally go for.

"The gun, if you don't mind my saying so," he said, "is a silly idea. What do you hope to accomplish with it? How long will it be before I take it from you? Two hours, perhaps, before you get careless. Even then I might wait for a still better chance. Sooner or later you have to sleep. Can you lock any door in *my* station and be sure I can't get in? I won't keep you in suspense—you can't." He shrugged. "But by all means try."

Unexpectedly, she threw away the gun and smiled at him.

"I'm not dumb," she told him.

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"That was for the time when I still wasn't sure you weren't violent. I think I can get on with you, Ord."

He nodded coldly. The pattern was clear now.

"I get it," he said.

The trouble was that it did nothing to settle the question of whether she was real or not. That she could be merely Una's successor was so obvious that there was no need to go into it. But it was also possible—unlikely, yet possible—that a girl of the type she seemed to be could have picked a space station as a hideout and could have acted as she had acted, was acting, and would act.

He was suddenly tired of the whole business. He wanted Earth. It had been a dull throb all this time, but now it flared to a mad longing, as it did every few months. It was all very well for Wordsworth to talk about that inward eye which is the bliss of solitude. Get Wordsworth out there and let him run a space station.

Ord wanted the presence of people about him that would keep him sane. He wanted to put women back in their place in his life. He wanted to be able to forget for hours, even days at a time, that there were such things as women.

Only twenty-four hours before, he had been congratulating himself that solitosis hadn't really got him. And now he didn't know whether Elsa was real or not. Either way, it was as bad. If she was real, he should have known it at once. If she was just another ghost, he should have known that, too.

"I'm going out to have a look at your ship," he said.

He thought she would object, but she merely shrugged.

"You might have left your suit on, then," she told him.

Twenty minutes later he was inside the little ship. He made no examination. That could come after he had settled something else. There was light and there was air. Fourteen pounds per square inch, the meters said.

He found a gasoline lighter and manipulated it clumsily with his big, semi-rigid gloves. The flame flared. But that meant nothing. If there was no lighter, and he saw it, he might also see it burn where there was no air.

There was a valve on his suit to test air pressure. He opened it. The little dial swung around to fourteen pounds. The question was, had he really opened the valve? He tried again, concentrating, making sure he really had hold of the valve. A half-turn was all that was necessary. Slowly, painfully, he turned it. He *saw* it turn. There was still cigarette

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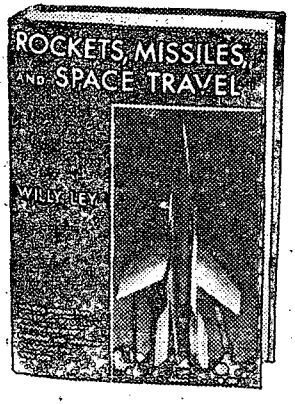

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smoke in the small, cramped quarters. He watched it swirl into the little box at his hip. The needle registered fourteen pounds.

He felt the sweat on his forehead. Trying to deceive himself, to get a jump ahead of his own mind, he lunged out into the open and twisted the valve again. He told himself he was only testing it. He looked down.

No pressure.

He raised his heavy arms and stumbled like a sleepwalker back to the ship's airlock. Still keeping his arms raised, he entered the control room again. Only then did he look down.

The dial, untouched, still read no pressure. There was no air on the ship. There was no ship. Now that he knew that, he was able to open and close the valve.

Elsa was no more real than Una.

IT was easier, then, to check and doublecheck. Very soon he was walking through the walls of the ship she had come in. It was simpler to check on it than on Elsa. She would remain real to the last, but the ship was only a minor part of the illusion.

He had had some bad moments in the last hour. It had become all too clear that he was losing his last defenses in his fight for sanity in insanity. He had won his battle again, but perhaps this was the last time he would win it. The next time he might fail to prove the illusion. That, after this, wouldn't necessarily prove the reality.

Elsa was finished. She had been too real and not real enough. Why had he ever let Una go?

He plodded back to the station and removed his suit. He found Elsa in the lounge, squatting on her heels and looking like a magazine cover.

"Out," he said bluntly. "It was a mistake your coming here. I'm sorry."

There was a flash of movement as she dived for the gun. Just in time he tensed himself, reminding himself of what he had learned, and when she fired at him he felt nothing.

He grinned back at her.

"The instinct of self-preservation is too strong," he said. "I can't let myself be shot, whatever happens."

He stepped forward. She fought him for the gun. She bit his wrist, and it hurt. But he got the gun.

"If you shoot me, nothing happens," he pointed out. "But if I shoot you, you die. You know that?"

She nodded sullenly and got up, put on her suit and left.

In twenty minutes, her ship took off. Ord didn't even watch it out of sight.

He still held the gun in his

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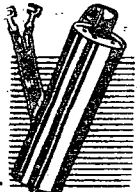

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hand. He threw it in a drawer. It would remain there until he forgot it. Then there would be no gun.

From now on, he decided, there would be no surrender to solitosis. There would be no more Elsas or Suzys or Margos. When he weakened, he would bring Una back, or he might have another try at male companionship.

FOR days, he thought he was winning his battle. He slept well, and he remained alone. He spent a lot of time in the observation room, but he never saw a ship.

The trouble was that the fight was not on the conscious level of his mind. There would be no warning before he would suddenly see a ship, without having taken any conscious decision. Then it would be too late to tell himself there was no ship.

It came at last. There was a tiny point of light moving visibly. As soon as he saw it, he left the observation room and fought with himself. He might convince the other part of his mind that it was a mistake, and when he went back to the observation room it would *be* a mistake—the moving point of light would be gone. It had happened before.

But solitosis was progressive, he thought dully, as he stood in the observation room four hours later and saw the ship. If it didn't get you under in one year, it did it in two. Or four or six. Una, intelligent and restrained, had been the last stand of a mind under constant fire. Una was part of the disease, yes, but a disease still controlled firmly and confidently. When he let Una go, he had been giving up.

The ship this time was a lifeboat from a larger vessel. That wasn't new. Suzy had come in a lifeboat. So had Dorothy, later, from the same mythical ship.

Ord stood and watched it land, concentrating so that his hair tingled with sweat. He wasn't trying to exorcize the ship; that would have been impossible. He was merely building into himself a powerful, binding resolve to know on this and all future occasions the truth from the lie. He would not drive the new visitor away as he had driven Elsa when he discovered she was another phantom. But he must *know*. Until Elsa came, he had always known. He mustn't lose that, whatever else he lost.

He saw a spacesuited figure emerge from the lifeboat, and then he went down to the airlock and waited.

He must be a hopeless romantic, he thought while he waited. Solitosis showed people a lot about themselves. There had been plenty of opportunity for

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realism, as opposed to romance, but he had never taken it.

The airlock opened. For a moment the face behind the plate of the helmet was shadowy and ill-defined. Then it cleared gradually, like a lantern slide carefully focused, sharp and clear, on a screen.

Ord sighed in relief. He hadn't proved yet that the new girl was another wraith, but it was going to be possible, after all. With Elsa's face as clear from the first second as his own in a mirror, how could he know?

THE girl opened her face-plate. "Colin Ord?" she said briskly. "I'm Dr. Lynn of Four Star Lines. Marilyn Lynn." She grinned, a friendly, put-you-at-your-ease grin. A professional grin — part of the bedside manner of a good doctor, male or female, young or old. "Cacophanous," she added, "but I've had quite a while to get used to it."

"Very nice," he said. "First remark of second castaway on desert island. Do you tell me the rest of the story straight away, or are you going to be coy?"

She frowned—putting the fresh patient in his place.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," she said, "until I've found out a little more about you."

"Excellent!" Ord answered. "Tone, inflection and diction just right. It all fits."

He saw with further relief that she was of the Una type. She was beautiful, naturally, but not fantastic. And as she stripped off her suit, he saw that she wore slacks and a tunic, which was reasonable. She looked intelligent. She wasn't too young—at least his own age. Perhaps he was still the master.

She looked at him, too, with the eye of a diagnostician.

"Don't bother," he told her. "I see things that aren't there. Particularly people."

She nodded. "I see. So you don't believe I'm here?"

"Well, I ask you," he said skeptically. "Would you, if you were me?" He remembered a line of nonsense verse—Lear, probably—and quoted, "What would you do if you were me to prove that you were you?"

She was weighing the situation calmly. She didn't seem to mind Ord seeing what she was doing.

"Do you *know* I'm not real?" she asked.

"No. That comes with time. At least, it always has so far."

"You mean you've always proved to yourself that your — visitors were mere fantasy?"

"With a struggle," he admitted.

"Interesting. That looks like a case of controlled solitosis. I never heard of one before."

Ord laughed cynically. "That's

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right, feed my ego. It always comes to that in the end."

The girl gestured at her discarded suit. "You can't tell whether that's real or not?"

"Not at once. Eventually, yes—I hope."

He led her to the lounge. She looked around and nodded. She seemed pleased.

"Everything neat and tidy. You have no idea what a pleasure it is to meet you, Mr. Ord."

"That doesn't make you real," replied Ord rudely. "They all say that."

She looked at him in surprise. "Why should I want to make you accept me as real?" she asked.

It was like a physical blow. Ord had no idea why, but that didn't lessen the effect.

"That's right," he said slowly. "Why should you?"

"Tell me about the others," she suggested.

Like any good doctor, she gave the impression that what motivated her questions was not clinical but personal interest. The practicing doctor, Ord mused, was primarily an artist, not a scientist.

He told her. He edited the story a little, but he told it fairly, with particular detail on Elsa and Una, his most recent companions.

"Una is interesting," Marilyn said. "She was the only one who knew everything that you do. She didn't let you talk about it, but she knew."

AUTOMATICALLY, Ord began to make coffee. Marilyn watched him.

"When will you know whether I'm real or not?" she asked casually.

"Can't say. Perhaps in five minutes, perhaps not for hours. I—"

"Don't tell me how you do it," she said quickly. "Not yet. Do it first. Does it involve me? I mean, you don't shoot me to see if I die, or anything, do you?"

He grinned. "Nothing like that. If I shot you, you would die—like the witches in history. They died if they were, and they died if they weren't."

"Your mind has remained agile enough."

"Naturally. I never heard of solitosis inhibiting intelligence. Did you?"

She was significantly silent.

He raised his eyebrows. "You mean it often happens? Or always?"

"Not always. Frequently. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? The mind unbalanced naturally functions less well than the normal mind."

"Benson was the exception that proves the rule?"

She nodded. She knew who Benson was. That, like almost everything else, proved nothing.

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She held up her cup before her. "Is this part of the test?" she asked. "Whether more coffee is actually drunk than you drink yourself?"

"No, that doesn't help. It would be very easy for me to make half what I thought I made, to bring out one cup and think I brought two, to take a nonexistent cup from a nonexistent girl, like this." He took it. "To fill it with nothing and pass it back, and later so . . ."

His words died, for he had seen something strange in her face. Terror or sadness or understanding, he couldn't be sure.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps I misunderstood."

"Something I said?" he continued. "Easy to make half what I thought I made . . . you knew about that, surely. And bringing out one cup when I thought I brought two. Nonexistent cup, nonexistent girl—it can't be because I called you a nonexistent girl, for we've been into that before. Naturally, if there's no cup I'd be careful, with part of my mind, not to pour coffee in it . . ."

He frowned. "There it is again. You tried not to show it this time, but I caught a faint shadow of it. Something I said or did frightens you, or makes you unhappy, or maybe just interests you. I'm not handing you imaginary coffee, I am? It seems real."

She was completely in control of herself again. She laughed. "No, not that. You're handing me real coffee, which means that part of your mind already knows I'm real. But it's the part you don't trust and can't touch."

"I'm not doing something I don't know I'm doing, am I?"

She shook her head. "Since you're bound to think about it, whatever I say—it was just something you said. What you know you said. And it's not horrible or frightening and there's no earthly reason why it should make me sad. It's just something I didn't know."

"You won't tell me any more than that?"

She answered the question with another. "Don't your puppets do what you tell them?"

"No. You know that."

She put down the cup. "I'll wash the dishes," she said lightly. "Will that prove anything?"

"Sometimes, for an intelligent girl, you're very dumb," he said gloomily. "Next time they were used, I could just imagine they were washed, couldn't I?"

"Of course." Her eyes—brown eyes, deep-set under thin eyebrows—followed him as he rose suddenly. "Where are you going?"

"To find out if you're real."

"My ship. Go ahead."

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ORD went to the airlock and put on his spacesuit. He thought for a while about what he might have said that brought that curious expression to Marilyn's face. But it was very clear that he could never, unaided, work out the problem. What he had said was so simple, so obviously true . . . and eventually she would tell him about it. It didn't matter.

There was nothing in what had happened so far, or what she had said, that settled the problem of the moment. Possibly, to add to all the other arguments against the possibility of Marilyn being a real woman, there was the consideration that, if she were, she would insist on it. But, after all, would she? She was a doctor, perhaps a psychiatrist. She knew solitosis.

A doctor of any kind, he told himself decidedly, encountering anyone with solitosis, would most certainly play along with him, telling him nothing, denying nothing, insisting on nothing.

That, he realized vaguely, was of vital importance. He was not at all sure why.

The test which had worked on Elsa's ship was as good as any, he thought. It might not work twice, but he would do his best to see that it did.

He opened the valve on his suit, making quite certain it registered atmosphere nil. Then he grasped his gloves together and strained his arms to pull them apart. When he opened the lifeboat's airlock, he kept his hands linked by his thumbs. In a few moments he stood in the control room of the little ship, which was the only room there, and his hands were still linked.

The needle registered fifteen pounds. A dull feeling of failure numbed him.

He had concentrated with all his power, making sure the valve was really open and that he never had a chance to close it. He tried again, opening and closing it.

He might have known that each new scheme only worked once. He thought, trying to be calm.

Solitosis wasn't a suicidal psychosis, or at least he had heard it was never. He had seen it in books. One small indication of that had been when Elsa shot him and he felt nothing, though she had looked perfectly real. He could be hurt, as when she bit him, but not seriously.

He battered his fist against the bulkhead. There was no straight spur of rock that height where the ship had landed. A bulkhead was there, or there was nothing.

His glove was made to resist a vacuum, but it wasn't cushioned against impact. His hand hurt and went on hurting.

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Grimly, he continued beating the bulkhead until he could not force himself to bear any more pain.

There was a bulkhead there. Therefore, there was a ship. His undamaged hand went to his faceplate. He hesitated, then reminded himself that solitosis wasn't suicidal. He opened the plate. He felt his nose, his eyes, his chin. He pinched his cheek.

The faceplate was open and he could breathe.

Only two possibilities were left. Either Marilyn and all that went with her were real, or he was over the top at last, absolutely in the grip of solitosis, so that he couldn't even be certain he had left the space station.

And if Marilyn was real . . .

He collapsed weakly as an insidious thought beat the spirit

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out of him. He was ready to believe in Marilyn, but there was one thing he could not ignore. Solitosis got *everyone*. People could fight it, but they could never hold it off. Yet it had very clearly not affected Marilyn. You knew solitosis when you saw it. Even he would know.

He could not say whether she existed subjectively or objectively — could he say whether the station existed, whether Earth existed, whether there was a Galaxy? Was there any essential difference between Una and his mother or his sister? Were they all creatures of his mind?

Life itself might be a thought in his mind. Matter could be merely a concept. *He* existed. "*I think, therefore I am.*" He could accept that. Could he accept anything else?

He forced himself fiercely back to normalcy, limiting himself to Marilyn. She existed, and because she came in a ship in which he could open his faceplate, she existed more than Una had.

Hanging determinedly onto that idea, he closed the plate and stumbled back to the station. It seemed very far away. He had taken too much out of himself. Mental effort could be even more exhausting than physical exertion. Whatever the truth might be, he had fought too hard toward it or away from it.

He got through the airlock into the station and, safely inside, fell on his face.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, he knew that he had proved Marilyn's existence beyond reasonable doubt. He had been ill, and she had tended him.

"You proved what you wanted to prove," she told him, when the worst was over. "But was it worth it?"

"It was worth it," he said, sitting up in bed. "No wonder whole philosophies have been founded on reality. It's the most important thing there is to a man."

She shook her head, smiling.

"Merely to you," she said. "Solitosis naturally affects what matters most to the individual. But we needn't talk about that."

There was a warmth, a kind-

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ness about her that none of the phantoms could ever have had, because they were all reflections of himself. He had made them what they were.

"How did you avoid solitosis?" he asked.

She smiled again. "The only way. There are fifty men and women in the *Lioness*, the relief ship. That number is well above the critical point. It will still be a while before they can land a big ship on this little world, but all the time while they're maneuvering, they'll be keeping me sane by being there. I know they are, you see. When you do, you'll improve."

Ord relaxed. Long, involved explanations were never satisfying. It was the simple explanation that one could instantly believe.

"That will take a while," he said. "I don't mind how long it takes."

He saw the same shadow pass across her face.

"Tell me," he said quietly.

"Look at me."

He looked. She was strong, quietly beautiful. She still wore her tunic and slacks. He even saw, with faint regret, that, while she wore no wedding ring, there was a white band on her finger where one would have been.

"Yes?" he urged.

"I didn't realize until you talked of a nonexistent girl," Marilyn said quietly. "I was real, yes, but not your picture of me."

"No, it's not so terrible," Marilyn went on. "Almost everything was as you thought. It's natural to send a doctor first to visit any sick person. I'm a doctor, and I was a girl once. But that was forty years ago. And you had to make me young and beautiful."

With an effort, Ord laughed naturally. "Was that all? You had me thinking—"

The old doctor didn't hear him. She wasn't thinking of her courage in coming to him alone, but remembered that all doctors take risks.

"It was pleasant to be a girl again," she said reflectively. "I could see myself in your eyes, and—almost—I was young again. I like you. If it hadn't been too completely ridiculous, I'd have fallen in love with you."

"As I grow old in the next few weeks, Ord," she told him, "you'll be recovering. It will show you how your case is progressing. When you see me as I really am, you'll be all right."

He put his hand gently on her arm. He was thinking of her courage in coming on ahead of the relief ship, alone, because she might be able to help a man who could not be quite sane.

"I think," he said, "I see you *now* as you really are."

—J. T. M'INTOSH

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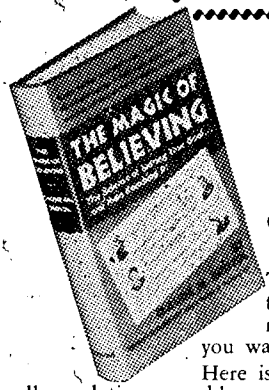

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2 carats	84.00
3 carats	108.00

e. GOLD CHAIN AND CROSS with 9 *Diamothyst* gems **$75.00**

JEWELERS ATTENTION:

It is to your benefit to have one of the amazing Diamothyst Gems in your shop for comparison with a diamond

WARNING: A great many dealers have mistaken this gem for a real diamond in making loans on *ring*:

We recommend you order a Diamothyst now.

COMPARE:

REFRACTORY INDEX OF DIAMOTHYST IS BETWEEN 2.62 and 2.90 as compared to DIAMOND'S 2.42

DISPERSION OF DIAMOTHYST RANGES BETWEEN 0.155 and 0.205 in comparison to the DIAMOND'S 0.025

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE WITH A 30-DAY TRIAL IN YOUR HOME.

YOU ARE THE SOLE JUDGE

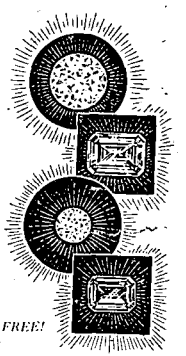
In this advertisement, you are assured, that if you are dissatisfied for any reason whatsoever, you may return the Diamothyst for 100% CASH REFUND WITHOUT QUESTION!

You can order them in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 — up to 10 carats at $24 a carat.

Take the price of the rings shown above in the 1 carat size and add $24 for each additional carat you want. ORDER TODAY, DON'T DELAY!

A beautiful engagement ring made with a *Diamothyst* presented to any girl will inspire her devotion. You can buy many things with the hundreds of dollars thus saved. Each *Diamothyst* is perfectly cut, with full 58 facets per brilliant stone. Legally we cannot refer to the *Diamothyst* as a *diamond*, so we ask you to order in the 3 most popular *diamond* shapes — namely the round or *BRILLIANT*, the oblong or *EMERALD* and the oval or *MARQUISE* cuts.

You may order these gems for setting by your local, friendly, trustworthy jeweler, who will be glad to verify your purchase, or you can order them in the mountings shown above.



FREE There is no charge for mounting *Diamothysts* in Your Jewelry — they will be mounted absolutely *FREE!*

HOW TO MEASURE FINGER SIZE

(1) Cut flat, stiff cardboard into a long narrow wedge Take ring that fits and is not bent (2) Slip it over narrow end of card until it stops—do not force Draw lines at both sides of ring Send us the cardboard Do not send your own ring, nor use string to measure

REGAL GEM CO., Dept. 12 318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey

Yes! Please rush my selection of DIAMOTHYST gems as I have indicated below. If not delighted, I may return them within 10 days for full refund. My finger size is.....

MOUNTED GEMS:

- ☐ A. 1 Carat Diamothyst Fishtail style set in 14kt. white gold mounting $12.00
- ☐ B. 1 Carat Modern Gypsy with DIAMOTHYST Gem set in 14kt. white or yellow gold mounting $65.00
- ☐ C. 1 Carat Princess Earrings $81.00
- ☐ D. 1 Carat Diamothyst set in masculine Box Style white or yellow gold mounting $60.00
- ☐ E. Gold Chain and Cross with 9 Diamothyst Gems $75.00
- ☐ Pendant with gold chain, 1 carat Diamothyst, only $65.00
  EACH ADDITIONAL CARAT $24. style as shown on model

UNMOUNTED GEMS: ☐ 1 Carat $24.00 ☐ 2 Carat $48.00 ☐ 3 Carat $72.00, etc
EACH ADDITIONAL CARAT $24.

NOTE: A $5 deposit must accompany each order. All prices tax included.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... Zone..... State.....

☐ I enclose $5. I will pay postman balance plus postage. *NOTE: If you don't know ring size, send thin strip of paper.* ☐ I enclose full price, send postage prepaid.

SENT ON APPROVAL

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